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CASES OF “DIFFRACTION” AND *LECTIO DIFFICILIOR* IN EARLY CHINESE MANUSCRIPTS

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The number of variants noted in the manuscripts of the *Gospels* in Greek is unbelievable. The apparatus of my edition of *De nuncio sagaci* has twice as many variants as words. What is more, after publication I found out that an important manuscript had escaped my notice. If it weren't for the fact that texts are regularly revised, they would become entirely unreadable in the long run.

Alphonse Dain

Abstract

Among the numerous topics nourishing the debate about the nature of Chinese manuscripts from the late Warring States period to the early years of the Christian era, the present article intends to concentrate on one: the production of *variora*, introducing the category of “diffraction” (or “multiple innovation”). There are frequent instances of diffraction in ancient manuscripts caused by orthographic/phonetic/semantic obstacles. More specifically, diffraction occurs when a particular reading is either discarded or hidden, or is subject to the proliferation of *variora* which are far from the “original genuineness”. But what is the right approach in attempting to amend a text or when choosing among *variora* regarding a specific pericope? In the present article, the classification of the nature of the *variora* will inevitably lead to an assessment of the “validity” of the *lectio difficilior* principle as a means of recovering at least the reading intended by the scribe/editor/author of a specific redaction, if not actually the “original” reading.

* Part of this article was presented as a paper at the “Early China Workshop”, organised by Edward Shaughnessy in 2001 at the University of Chicago, Dept. of East Asian Languages and Civilizations. Thanks to the constructive criticism I received as a feedback at that time, I addressed my research on excavated texts towards that methodological rigour which is distinctive of Ed Shaughnessy. I have also benefited from some suggestions given me by William Boltz, whom I have recently sent a draft version of the paper presented in Chicago. Tiziana Lippiello, Maurizio Scarpari, Riccardo Fracasso, Micol Biondi and Filippo Salvadori have read an earlier version of the present article and have helped smooth out various snags in the text. I would like to thank all those mentioned, while relieving them of all responsibility for any errors or inaccuracies present in the article. Finally I want to express my deepest gratitude to Michael Friedrich and Matthias Richter for having allowed me to participate in the “Second Hamburg Tomb Text Workshop”.

Preliminary theoretical remarks

The acquisition of a growing number of codices written on bamboo, wood and silk dating back from the late Warring States period (453–222 B.C.) to the early years of the Christian era has thrown classical sinological studies into disarray. Those works demand of scholars to carry on a considerate – and unavoidable – reflection on the nature of the transmitted sources and on their relation with the manuscript codices. Even if exhaustive assessments of each single excavated text may be premature, it is, however, undeniable that the impact of these recent archaeological discoveries on historical, philosophical, religious and palaeographic studies will be massive.

Among the innumerable topics that nourish the debate over the nature of these codices, mostly coming from tombs of the middle-high aristocracy of the area correspondent to the ancient state of Chu 楚, I would like to focus on the vexed question of the production of *variora*, thus introducing in the study of ancient Chinese texts the category of *diffrazione* “diffraction”. I use the term “diffraction” (or “multiple innovation”) in its technical sense as employed by Gianfranco Contini in his *Breviario di ecdotica*, where with utmost effectiveness he borrows this term from optics.¹

There are frequent instances of diffraction in ancient manuscripts caused by orthographic/phonological/semantic obstacles; more specifically, diffraction occurs when a specific reading is subject either to its being discarded or hidden, or to the proliferation of *variora* which are far from the “original” genuineness. The classification of the nature of the *variora* will inevitably lead me to an assessment of the “validity” of the *lectio difficilior* principle as a means of recovering at least the reading intended by the scribe/editor/author of *that* version in question, if not actually the “original” reading.²

While it emerges from the processes of *recensio* and *collatio* that a single innovation in a text’s tradition is not necessarily a significant element, multiple

1 Contini 1992: 29, 140–143.

2 The positions of scholars on the effectiveness of the *lectio difficilior* principle in the analysis of Chinese manuscript texts are uncertain. Bearing in mind that the divergence of readings and proliferation of editions are implicit in the process of textual transmission and that corruption is progressive over time, it is not universally considered appropriate to counter the evident tendency of copyists to trivialise and simplify by using the criterion of *lectio difficilior*. The consistency of said criterion, which can be traced back to Aristarchus (ca. 217–145 B.C.) and was introduced in sinological studies by William Boltz (1984), has recently been called into question by Scott Cook (2003).

innovations require instead a more accurate investigation, since they may be explained in terms of an objective obstacle in the “original”, or in any case in the “highest” ranks of the *stemma codicum*. From the perspective of textual criticism, said “objective obstacle” is nothing else than the *lectio difficilior* that needs to be reintroduced.

Diffraction thus induces careful consideration about the definition of a criterion that guides us in the choice of a specific reading (the *difficilior*?; the *facilior*, inasmuch as it is “*clarior*”?; the *media*?) to the detriment of the others, prescribing a classification of types of *variora*. This is a crucial stage, as it is perfectly clear that the degree of kinship and ancestry between the codices is determined by variants and errors, since they are evidence of the introduction of innovation that are unlikely to have a polygenetic origin: the polygenesis of an error is worthless as proof.³ There is a very thin line separating the categories of variants and errors. Be that as it may, an error is regarded as damage or a glaring flaw of the original reading,⁴ while a variant is defined more neutrally as a pure innovation, a divergence which might even seem authentic, or at least “acceptable”. What must be better specified is that errors are part of a subclass of *variora* distinguished by being sporadic and highly “intense” innovations, as they must be monogenetic in nature.⁵ I use the term “intense” as the examination of the *variora* is not very suitable for clear considerations between “good reading” and “bad reading”: For textual criticism, it is *in primis* genealogy that determines “goodness”, not axiology.

Errors are usually divided into two main categories (“separative” and “conjunctive”)⁶ and there are three types of variants: “genetic”, i.e. preceding the

3 Nevertheless, obvious corruptions are not enough to confirm kinship. “Correspondence in obvious errors and in ‘trivializations’ does not prove kinship. And kinship is not generally proved by correspondence between various witnesses in regard to genuine readings, because the genuine reading may have been preserved independently in different branches of the tradition” (Pasquali 1988: XVI).

4 Contini (1992: 20) defines errors as “elements of which the probability that they belong to the starting point is virtually nil”.

5 In as far as it is an “innovation”, an error would be better defined as an “erroneous variant”.

6 “Separative errors” are those which are impossible for the copyist to correct by conjecture, thus a witness free of such an error is independent from one in which the separative error occurs; “conjunctive errors” confirm instead kinship between all the witnesses in which they appear, since they have a monogenetic origin.

definitive reading; “evolutionary”, which follow the *vulgata* (i.e. the *textus receptus*) reading, and “adiaphorous” (neutral or “colourless”).⁷

The real fundamental distinction regarding the *variora* among witnesses of a specific textual tradition is still however the distinction between lexical and orthographic variants, and William Boltz has produced a set of exemplary studies clarifying the nature of these two main types of textual variants and providing invaluable suggestions for applying a rigorous and effective methodology in the study of Chinese manuscripts.⁸ The main point of the issue is that however it is not always possible to establish with certainty the nature of the *variora*. Indeed, a very intriguing phenomenon that characterises Chinese texts is that the initial use made of an orthographic variant can end up in the crystallisation of one or more readings that establish themselves as lexical variants. At the same time there is also the possibility that the early Chinese manuscripts may reveal “false lexical variants”, in other words it should not be ruled out that the manuscripts show readings which following a comparison with the received version(s), wrongly appear as the bearers of a “real” lexical

7 The definition of “adiaphorous variants” in the case of ancient Chinese texts deserves an in-depth investigation. The choice among adiaphorous readings turns upon a point which is essentially critical, not mechanical and therefore determined by genealogical relationship between codices. Since by definition these variants enjoy equal stemmatic authority, having the same semantic and formal plausibility, the philologist’s choice should depend in each case on internal criteria (*usus scribendi*) and show itself to be compatible with the high degree of versatility characterising ancient Chinese graphs. For example, where the text is not defined by a special rhythmic-poetic structure or does not follow equally precise or predictable stylistic-normative criteria (such as the adoption of certain taboos, for instance), it will be hard to establish the superior authority of readings like, for example, *guo* 國 rather than *bang* 邦, or *ru* 如 rather than *ruo* 若. Establishing the degree of adiaphory becomes overwhelmingly important especially in the process of converting the graphs of the codices into modern Chinese standard form, through a process that is rarely, alas, directly “equipollent”. In this sense, the contribution of Matthias Richter in this journal perfectly illustrates how slight differences in shape or size between graphs that can be traced to the “same” modern character (as in the case of *sheng* 聖), while maintaining a semantic adiaphory, are not fully “adiaphorous” inasmuch as each tiny formal oscillation can provide us with important elements regarding the way the codices were written, the skill and erudition of the scribe, the “colouring” represented by the adoption of subjective or regional orthographic conventions. Even the recourse to trivial phonetic loans (where the semantic adiaphory is “indirectly” derived), such as *sheng* 聲 “sound” instead of the *sheng* 聖 “Sage”, shows however to be useful in detecting conventions and peculiar choices, never absolutely colourless and even less taken for granted.

8 In particular, see Boltz 1984; 1985; 1995; 1997; 1999; 2000.

innovation, when actually they are cases of purely orthographic variants. This means that a distinction between graphic variants and lexical ones can only be drawn on the basis of any single version of a given text and of the never probatory evidences of the way each author/editor/scribe might have understood the graph at issue.⁹

In the cases I will examine later on, I will focus on “unsuspected” readings of the *vulgata* which, when compared with those of the manuscripts, threaten to undermine the latter’s authority. Obviously, the nature of the “distance” between the available readings will have to be carefully investigated. Sometimes, in fact, it might be a case of “apparent distance”, for the simple fact that we are not able to understand orthographic conventions that developed in antiquity and later fell into disuse.

Peculiarities of Chinese manuscripts

Among the Chinese manuscripts recovered in the past decades, there are works which match a *vulgata* in a more or less partial form, and, above all, works without transmitted counterparts. In the case of manuscripts without a transmitted counterpart we are often fumbling in the dark because *lacunae* due to physical damage of the writing medium have to be filled or because constant obstacles get in the way of determining the ‘true’ reading intended by the scribe beyond the jungle of orthographic variants and phonetic loans lying behind the graphs we read. However, the study of manuscript versions of a *receptus* cannot be made any simpler than that. At first sight, the analysis of those manuscripts with transmitted counterparts is made easier by the fact that we can refer to one or more editions based on the *vulgata*, even when dealing with “open recension”,¹⁰ which anyhow presuppose a reasonable stability based on a restricted

9 Faced with these phenomena, the wide degree of differentiation among the various interpretations of scholars with regard to certain specific graphs is not surprising. It seems rather understandable that similar discrepancies should at least be necessary, inasmuch as they are ascribable to the very nature of the early Chinese writing system and to the procedure followed in copying texts in antiquity.

10 Pasquali (1988: 126) defines an “open” or “transversal recension” as one in which “the reading of the archetype cannot be fixed mechanically by noting the coincidence of readings in certain apographs (“closed recension”), but can be determined only by making use of *iudicium*, selecting on the basis of mainly internal criteria between two (or more) readings, neither of which is shown to be secondary by the external, genealogical, criterion”. In the

textual core. Actually, it only appears to be an easier enterprise, given that the *emendatio* cannot be carried out mechanically, perhaps filling in the *lacunae* in the manuscript by referring to the *vulgata*, or *vice versa* rejecting the latter's legitimacy in favour of the manuscript readings. These type of *manoeuvres* are highly risky, particularly in view of the nature of several Chinese manuscripts being brought to light by archaeological excavations. On the one hand, the instability and the versatility of the scripts found in early Chinese manuscripts combine, together with a considerable use of loans, to highlight the distance from their respective *recepti*. Nevertheless, before assuming that the manuscript reading is preferable inasmuch as it is more ancient and therefore closer to the "original" formulation (in so far as it "sets" the state of the text in a precise point of its tradition which is closer, in time, to its presumed archetype),¹¹ it must be remembered that "a *recentior* is not necessarily a *deterior*, and that relying exclusively on ancient sources can be rather risky. An authoritative witness is independent of its age", as Giorgio Pasquali¹² has maintained. In perfect agreement, Edward J. Kenney has claimed that "although it is probably true that the older a manuscript is, the better is its text [...] at best age gives only a rough indication of a manuscript's value".¹³ The assessment that "a *recentior* is therefore not necessarily a *deterior*" is strengthened by the possibility that the Chinese manuscripts recently excavated, ancient as they may be, already include a

case of an open recension, *selectio* in the presence of adia phorous variants is in itself an extremely difficult obstacle to overcome. At the same time it should not be forgotten that memory, as a factor that encourages the alteration of the content of pericopes and certain displacements with similar passages or repetitions, contributes hugely to determining the degree of openness of a given recension. The mixed mnemonic-textual tradition therefore no longer assures "vertical" traits to the method of transmitting and introducing innovations, but instead an "irregular" dimension.

11 The *codex archetypus* is the lost founder of the surviving tradition. The presence of at least one significant shared error (therefore a "conjunctive" error) in all the witnesses justifies an element of mediation between the original and the known tradition: the archetype. Subject of deep consideration right from antiquity with regard to its real or just theoretical existence, the archetype is therefore the intermediary "X" between the original and the tradition, the apograph of the original, distinguished from it because it is already flawed by an erroneous conjunctive variant that can infect the whole tradition. With Gianfranco Contini, the archetype becomes in fact a necessary "ecdotal abstraction" up against which all critical editions come in the absence of the original. Where the tradition cannot be traced back to a single archetype but to a "multiple" founder disfigured by gaps and errors and perhaps retaining traces of multiple "original" drafts, one talks of an "archetype in motion".

12 Pasquali 1988: XVI.

13 Kenney 1995: 125.

number of flaws, perhaps reflecting the structure of a primal *vulgata* which developed in the remotest times and had already been damaged at the time when the excavated manuscripts were written. It may even be possible that later redactions depend wholly or in part on sources other than those from which the excavated codices are descended. Therefore it cannot be ruled out that a *recentior* may be the result of a “good” *collatio*, or at least that it may descend from “extrastematic” witnesses which preserve genuine readings.

Talking of “collations” means evoking a practice quite common in ancient times. It is likely that the Chinese editors (if not the copyists-interpolators themselves ...) were making critical choices by selecting the reading considered to be authoritative from a series of available *variora*. In preferring a particular reading, the scribe might have relied on an option no trace of which remains in the *vulgata*, or he might, knowingly or not, have introduced a variant that would contribute to the exponential increase of “alternative” readings to the genuine one. Being unable to explain a scribe’s preference for a particular reading, the philologist has to resort to conjecture (*divinatio*), in other words a proposed reconstruction of the text often based on data no more available within the tradition.

This type of consideration conjures up the disarming condition typical of the study of ancient texts, in other words the suspicion of either “horizontal” or “transversal” contaminations between different “branches” of the *stemma codicum*, a phenomenon that occurs when there are several antigraphs that intervene through full or partial contaminations and collations. When this happens, the possibility of a vertical and mechanical linearity in the transmission disappears and clues arise in support of the introduction of variants in unpredictable ways, conjecture on the part of the scribe not excluded.

Diffractions in Chinese manuscripts

What stance should then be taken before the thorniest of the philologist’s problems, the question of “diffraction”? Starting from the two fundamental subtypes (diffraction in *praesentia* and in *absentia*), Contini distinguishes three different figures of diffraction:

- 1) divergence of “colourless” or adia-phorous variants in the presence of a *lectio difficilior*;

- 2) divergence of variants that are, at least in part, clearly erroneous in the absence of a *lectio difficilior*;
- 3) divergence of variants that are, at least in part, adia-phorous in the absence of a *lectio difficilior*.

In the case of Chinese manuscripts from the fourth to the first centuries B.C., the very nature of the diffraction assumes its own peculiar character, obviously linked to the type of the scripts and to the texts where the phenomenon appears. That said, it is legitimate to wonder if we can safely rely on the criterion of *lectio difficilior* to select the reading to be regarded as genuine. In other words, what is the right approach to take in attempting to emend a text or choosing among *variora* regarding a specific passage? For us, as for the scribes of the fourth century B.C., who were ready to write a text based on one or more antigraphs from which cases of diffraction emerge, there is a strong temptation to accept the *lectio difficilior* criterion, but this too can lead to a *cul-de-sac*. Unfortunately the attempt to solve a case of diffraction often gives rise to the emergence of adia-phorous variants, that is to say variants which would be free from doubts and suspicions if the codices in which they occurred were “unique” (*codex unicus*). Even if imposed by the structure of the Lachmannian analysis itself that makes it necessary to postulate the existence of the *lectio difficilior*, the whereabouts of the *lectio difficilior* itself remains basically “unspecified” and generates the following aporetic and paradoxical knot in which stemmatological logic then becomes entangled: the identification of the *lectio difficilior in absentia* is often a mirage, as it produces multiple solutions, and not a single and univocal *lectio*.

If the authentic reading survives in certain “branches” of the tradition (diffraction *in praesentia*), it is to be identified within the process of *recensio*. Otherwise, as already said, it may be possible that the original reading has been replaced by readings that are clearly or deceitfully erroneous and it is so absent in the tradition of a text; for this reason it must be reintroduced by conjecture: thus diffraction *in absentia*.¹⁴ But how should the *lectio difficilior* dimmed by tradition be recovered?

In the following pages I shall draw attention to some excerpts taken from different lines of transmission of the *Laozi*, including the Guodian *Laozi* parallels 郭店老子 (GD), the two witnesses on silk from Mawangdui 馬王堆 (MWD

14 For a further discussion of the possible “conjunctive” value (anyway indicating kinship) of the *varia lectio* as a corollary of the Neo-Lachmannian approach, see Contini 1992: 115–134; Antonelli 1985: 195; Bentivogli and Vecchi Galli 2002: 66.

A and MWD B) and some *recepti*, that is the edition transmitted together with the commentary by Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249, WB) and the one by Heshang Gong 河上公 (HSG).

Manuscript evidence which has come to light in recent years has often helped to explain – and at the same time made more obscure – many passages of the *Laozi*. In fact, the hope to progress in the understanding of such an essential work that derives from the finding of so ancient manuscripts is regularly weakened by the disorientation caused by the possibility of alternative, sometimes equally plausible readings in different versions of the same pericope. In addition it must not be forgotten that a salient element that arises with increasing clarity hinges on the fact that different readings, and the consolidation of certain lexical variants, can often have an orthographic basis.¹⁵

Let us now move on to closely examining a much debated pericope taken from stanza 41 of the *Laozi*, which gives a fitting and highly representative example of the extent of diffraction:

GD B (slip 10) ¹⁶	明道女孛	“The Bright <i>Dao</i> seems to be exuberant.”
MWD B	明道若費	“The Bright <i>Dao</i> seems to be extravagant.”
WB	明道如昧	“The Bright <i>Dao</i> seems to be dim.”
HSG	明道若昧	“The Bright <i>Dao</i> seems to be dim.”

The following questions arise: What are the relations between *bo/bei* 孛, *fei* 費 and *mei* 昧? How can the presence of 孛 in GD B be explained? To what extent can we expect 昧 to be a loan for 孛 and 費? Can we trace diffraction back to a single original reading? Could one reading among those mentioned above be called “authentic” or “more authoritative”? Does the fact that the three graphs 孛, 費 and 昧 conventionally all stand for words which “literally” belong to the

15 Let us think, for example, of the diffraction at stanza 8 of the *Laozi*. In the reading *you jing* 有靜 “manifests quiescence” of MWD A, MWD B responds with *you zheng* 有爭 “to have conflicts”, but the *vulgata* has *bu zheng* 不爭 “does not fight, does not compete”. MWD B perhaps enables us to catch the derivation of the traditional reading, due to the “word play” between *jing* 靜 “tranquil, calm” and *zheng* 爭 “to fight” following the cancellation (mental, perhaps, more than real) of the element *qing* 青. Further evidence of the fact that, at least graphically, MWD A and B make no distinction between *jing* 靜 and *zheng* 爭 is provided by the closing line of stanza 8, where MWD A reads *jing* 靜 “quiescence” in the clear meaning of *zheng* 爭 “contentious” (this reading is registered in MWD B and shared by the *vulgata*). Cf. Boltz 1984: 199–200.

16 References to the manuscripts on bamboo from Guodian 郭店 follow the sequence of bamboo slips proposed in *GDCMZJ*.

wei 微 rhyme group imply that they are interchangeable phonetic loans, or does it mean that they replace other graphs no more attested in the tradition of the *Laozi* available to us?

I suspect that the scribe/editor of GD B could have chosen 孛 to actually refer to *bei* 悖 “obscure, covered, shadowy”.

Let us take as our starting point MWD B, where we find *fei* < **p'iwəd* 費 “wasteful, extravagant, elaborated to excess” (also used to write the toponym *bi* 鄴 or the word *fu* 拂 “to revolt against”, “vast and extended”). Scholars like D.C. Lau, Xu Kangsheng and Robert Henricks take this graph to be a variant of *fei* 費 (“dull” in Lau’s translation).¹⁷ The *Shuowen jiezi* glosses 費 as *mu bu ming ye* 目不明也 “defective, unclear vision; poor eyesight” or “that which the sight cannot make out because it is dark, something unclear to sight” or, in Henricks’s words, “things being in the dark”.¹⁸ Henricks, by recovering the legitimacy of the reading of MWD B in the light of GD B, argues that *fei* 費 in the meaning of “scattered, dispersed, diffuse” could be considered as the word intended by the GD B scribe, who wrote 孛 as a phonetic loan.¹⁹ Is that enough to justify the use of 費, while the *vulgata* reads *mei* 昧 “dim, obscure, hidden” and GD B reads *bo/bei* 孛 “exuberant, luxuriant, overflowing, “comet”, “go against”?

Let us go on with an examination of the possible relationship between 孛 and 費. Graphs related to *bei/bo* 孛 “comet, luxuriant, exuberant” – such as 悖 (now read *bo* “to go towards”, or *po* “horn, wind instruments”, or *bei*, as equivalent to *bei* 悖 “rebel, intemperate”) and *bei* 悖 (“to oppose oneself, to revolt against”, “to hide, to conceal”, but also “prosperous, abundant”) – are attested as loans for 費 in numerous sources. For example, two different editions of Zheng Xuan’s 鄭玄 (127–200) commentary to the *Liji* 禮記 chapter *Ziyi* 緇衣 offer as alternative readings of 費 both 悖 and 悖 in reference to the line *kou fei er fan* 口費而煩, unfortunately missing in both the Guodian and Shanghai Museum *Ziyi* manuscripts.²⁰

17 Cf. Lau 1989: 192–195, Xu Kangsheng 1992: 11, Henricks 1989: 102. See also *GDCMZJ*: 118–119.

18 *Ibidem*. It should also be noted how the *Shuowen jiezi* glosses *mei* 昧 in the same way as 費, i.e. *mu bu ming ye* 目不明也.

19 Henricks 2000: 99.

20 *Liji* 33/15. Wang Xianqian 王先謙 explains 費 as a phonetic loan for 悖, which is in turn a graphic variant for the 悖, which he deems the correct character for this *Liji* passage. The same relationship between 悖 and 費 also exists in the light of two passages from the *Mozi* 墨子, *qi bu bei zai* 豈不悖哉 (89/49/20) and *qi bu fei zai* 豈不費哉 (90/49/40), in which Wang Xianqian equates 費 and 悖 as having the meaning of *ni* 逆 “rebel, revolt against”,

Supposing that the examined line taken from *Laozi* 41 was truly balanced in each of the editions available in order to preserve that “ironic opposition” (to use Boltz’s words)²¹ that permeates the entire stanza, we will then have to try to determine whether the character 費 in MWD B can really be considered as a loan for 暝 “dark, obscure, gloomy, mysterious, covered”, i.e. as an antonym to *ming* 明. 暝 could have easily been written 悖 (as in GD B), and therefore claim the same legitimacy to be used, like 悖 and 悖, as a loan for 費. According to the *Jiyun* 集韻, 暝 belongs to the *dui* 隊 rhyme group and means *an* 暗 “dark, obscure”; 暝 also appears in the *Wudu* 吳都 rhapsody by Zuo Si 左思 (3rd century) in *Wenxuan* 文選, where it is glossed by Li Shan 李善 (d. 689) as *an* 闇 “eclipse, evening, night, twilight”, “obscure, dark”.²² Again, we will have a perfect antonym to *ming* 明. But philology does not allow short cuts; on the contrary, according to the principles in which philologists mainly confide in cases of diffraction – *lectio difficilior* and *usus scribendi* – jumping to hasty conclusions is ill-advised.

It is no accident that Boltz (2000: 47–50), in addressing the case shown above, precisely trusted in the *lectio difficilior* principle. Said principle, Boltz rightly points out, counsels against identifying *mei* 昧 “dim” as the intended reading in all four versions of the *Laozi* considered, suggesting that the process of the formation of *variora* within this pericope had rather, through “trivialisation”, resulted in *mei* 昧. In other words, the reading “*mei* 昧” could not be identified as the obstacle that, at the high level of the *stemma*, has produced the diffraction testified in GD B and MWD B. *Mei* 昧 is, in fact, a more obvious solution, albeit less sophisticated from a semantic perspective, because it is aimed at balancing with its counterpart *ming* 明 clearly and predictably. From

“trouble”. This has probably encouraged Yin Zhenhuan 尹振環 (2001: 124) to read the graph 悖 in GD B, as *bei* 悖 or even *bei* 悖, in the sense of “to violate, to go against”. *Bei* 悖 “disoriented, perplexed” is glossed in the *Shuowen jiezi* as *luan* 亂 “disorderly”; *bei* 悖 is equivalent to *bei* 悖 in the sense of “rebel, revolt against”, which in its turn is interchangeable with *beifu* 悖. This confirms a further connexion between the graphs 弗 and 悖. The character 悖 could either stand for the word *fu* “sad, melancholic”, “swelling” in the technical medical meaning, or the word *fei* “restless, anxious”. Curiously, *Shuowen jiezi* glosses 悖 with *yu* 鬱, that, as well as taking on the semantic value of “heart swollen with sadness”, is enriched by a nuance that can be traced to “abundant, luxuriant, lush”, on a par with 悖. Might this be a coincidence? Is the proximity of the archaic pronunciations of *yu* 鬱 (術部, **ɣwət*) and *bo/bei* 悖 (**b'wət*/**b'wəd*) sufficient to consider the two characters as loans?

21 Boltz 2000: 47.

22 *Wenxuan*: 278–279.

the strictly stemmatological point of view, the proliferation of readings would be due rather to the emerging of the reading 昧 starting from 費 or 亨 (or other characters that can be traced back to them *via* graphic/phonetic/semantic criteria), or even from yet another graph excluded from the tradition: It would therefore have been a “hidden” reading at a certain level of the *Laozi* textual tradition, at present not yet “visibly” re-emerged (a diffraction *in absentia*, therefore). Adroitly working out his hypothesis, Boltz (2000: 49) does not rule out that the graphs 費 or 亨 could stand for a fourth, or even further different words “that still were at least phonetically and perhaps also semantically compatible with that orthographic representation”.

Boltz’s attention rests therefore on *fei* 𠄎, homophonous with 費, meaning “new moon, that gives off a pale light”. This reading would satisfy two fundamental requisites: On the one hand, together with 費 and 亨, *fei* 𠄎 respects its belonging to the “emergent, burst(ing) forth word-family” typical of the 弗 and 亨 *xiesheng* 諧聲 series, something that does not apply, on the contrary, for *mei* 昧. On the other hand, *fei* 𠄎 would keep the “ironic opposition” that permeates the text while slightly attenuating the contrast with *ming* 明 compared to *mei* 昧. The sense of the pericope would then move from “a Brilliant *Dao* which seems to be dim” to “a Brilliant *Dao* which seems to be out like the first light of the new moon”.²³

Assuming however that the character 亨 in GD B could stand for 𠄎, and after having partly clarified its compatibility with the use of 費 in MWD B, the occurrence of 昧 in *Laozi* 41 *receptus* would be mainly justified on semantic rather than on graphic-phonetic grounds.

Hence: 費 (≈ 𠄎) ≈ 𠄎 ≈ 𠄎 ≈ 𠄎 ≈ 亨.²⁴ Furthermore, taking into account the semantic affinities, even the following relation may be posited: 亨 ≈ 𠄎 ≈ 昧.

23 In actual point of fact, and despite the phonetic assimilation between 𠄎 and 費, I have not found any example of the two characters being used one in place of the other. This however does not make it impossible to hypothesise that the two characters were really loans. In accordance with the principle that, in cases of diffraction, one often ends up by suggesting not a single *lectio difficilior*, but rather several *lectiones difficiliores*, I believe that another highly plausible solution could be *po/pei* 𠄎 “soft light of dawn, of the sun that is on the point of rising” (a synonym of *hu* 𠄎). Among other things, Liu Shipai 劉師培 in his *Chuci kaoyi* 楚辭考異 records how, in the *Jiusi* 九思 section, *fei* 𠄎 in some editions appears instead of *po/pei* 𠄎.

24 The sign “≈” indicates an assimilation that responds to criteria that might be phonetic, graphic or semantic.

At this point, we see the need to extend the investigation to another passage in MWD *Laozi* A and B which records a variant to the reading *mei* 昧 of *Laozi receptus*, which can supply further useful data. The pericope *qi xia bu mei* 其下不昧 “its bottom is not dark” from *Laozi* 14, in MWD *Laozi* A and B records the substitution of 昧 with *hu* 忽 “to forget, neglect”, “negligible, minimum quantity”, “confused, indistinct”, so that the line *qi xia bu hu* 其下不忽 assumes the meaning of “nothing smaller below it”.²⁵ This reading was already attested in the version of the *Laozi* carved on the so-called Yilong 易龍 stele (708 AD) and in the Xiang Er 想爾 redaction (ca. 250 AD), where *hu* 忽 occurs, in the opinion of some scholars, as standing for *hu* 忽 “a reduced, negligible quantity, infinitesimal”.²⁶

I suspect that the reading *mei* 昧 in *Laozi* 14 *receptus* became consolidated as a lexical variant, but could originally have been a loan for *hu* 忽, with the meaning of “small, negligible”, as attested in MWD *Laozi* A and B. In other words, the preference accorded in the *receptus* to *mei* 昧 “dark, dim” may originally not have reflected a lexical, but rather an orthographic variant. The confusion between the two characters was probably induced by the fact that many graphs stemming from *wu* 勿, among which *hu* 忽/吻 “first light of dawn, half-light of the morning” and *hu* 惚, “confused, vague” are actually associated with the idea of “obscure, dark”, “not distinct”. For example, the commentary to *Hanshu* 57 (2588) glosses *hu shuang* 忽爽 in the phrase *hu shuang anmei* 忽爽暗昧 as *wei ming* 未明 “not yet bright” or “not sparkling”, which corresponds to *mei* 昧.

Clarifying the link between 昧 and 忽 would further support the use of 昧 as a loan for the forms *hu* 忽/吻 and 惚, and would perhaps bear out even closer links between 昧 and 費/費. Thus, in light of the pericope from *Laozi* 41, which we addressed at the outset, not only could we establish an explicit relation

25 The translation is from Henricks (1989: 214), who adopts the adia-phorous transcription 物, like Boltz (1984: 200), while Gao Ming (1996: 284) adopts the standard graph 忽. For a detailed examination of the pericope in question see Andreini 2004a: 210–211.

26 This is confirmed by the notes of Yan Shigu 顏師古 (581–645) to various passages of the *Hanshu* 87 (3584), where *hu* 忽 and *hu* 忽 are both assimilated to *qing* 輕 “to neglect”, thus “negligible, infinitesimal”. The same convergence between *hu* 忽 and *qing* 輕 is attested in the *Yupian* 玉篇. In the *Xiang Er Laozi* text, the comment is clear in defining *bu hu* 不忽 as “do not move quickly with sound”, “do not whoosh”, according to Bokenkamp’s translation (1997: 96). At least in their modern standard form, the graphs 忽 and 忽 are easy to confuse, even though the first writes a word *hu* meaning “rapid, fast”, while the other is a variant of *hu* 吻, meaning “the first light of the dawn”.

between 昧 and 費/費, but we could also better justify their use as loans for 亨/暉.

Considering again the pericope from *Laozi* 14 *qi xia bu hu* 其下不忽 according to MWD *Laozi* A and B, the adiphory between the forms 忽 and 物 is evident, on top of that the two graphs are often alternatives to 惚. This is supported by the double occurrences of the graphs shown below as recorded in *Laozi* 21:

MWD A	物
MWD B	沕 ²⁷
WB	惚
HSG	忽

The close relation between 忽 and 惚 is also evident in light of another pericope taken from *Loazi* 14, where Heshang Gong's commentary and a manuscript fragment from Dunhuang at line *shi wei hu huang* 是謂惚恍 read 忽 for 惚 (沕 in MWD B).

It is then necessary to point out how 忽 and 習 (習)/眴, deriving from the *wu* 勿-form, occurred interchangeably one in place of the other, as attested by numerous sources: E.g. the same person Zhonghu appears as 仲忽 in *Lunyu* 18.11, but as 中習 in *Hanshu* 20, or the expressions *yun fu piao hu* 雲輔飄習 and *xiang hu ru shen* 嚮習如神 in Li Shan's *Wenxuan* commentary.²⁸ Thus, not only is there a specific relation between 忽 and 習/習, but another one was found between the former and *wu/mei* 習 “to squint”, “dark, gloomy”, as evident in the line *shen xin hu huang* 神心忽恍 from the *Preface* (*xu* 序) to the *Fayan* 法言 quoted in *Hanshu* 87 (3581) with *wu* 習 in place of 忽.

Leaving *mei* 昧 temporarily aside, what we have so far posited may be summed up as follows: Since 忽 ≈ 惚 and 物 ≈ 惚, it follows as an obvious consequence that 忽 ≈ 物; moreover, together with 忽 ≈ 習 (≈ 眴), it is also supported by the sources that 忽 ≈ 習.

27 The graph *hu* 沕 reappears in a line corresponding to *Laozi* 20 *receptus* in MWD B. The scribe of MWD A again writes 物, a variant of *hu* 忽 “evanescent, vague, like the movement of waters” (graph adopted also by HSG), while WB has *dan* 澹 “shaky, quick” and the Fu Yi 傅奕 (558–639) redaction has *dan/yan* 淡 “light, insipid” or, given the specific context, “rush, rough tide”.

28 *Wenxuan*: 988–989 and 491–492.

If we go on performing cross-checks, the following can be obtained: *Shuowen jiezi zhu*²⁹ traces a precise connection between *fei* 費 and *wu/mei* 眴 (a visible variant of 眴), which perhaps as such can likely be considered a variant of *hu* 眴/晷 “the dawn’s early lights, obscure, tenebrous”. On the other hand, 昧 and 眴 were actually interchangeable, which is clear from the line *shiyi yue xin yi shuo dan dong zhi mei shuang* 十一月辛巳朔旦冬至昧爽 in *Shiji* 史記,³⁰ which the *Hanshu* read with *hu* 眴 in place of *mei* 昧.³¹ Hence, as 昧 ≈ 晷 (≈ 眴) and 晷 (≈ 眴) ≈ 忽 ≈ 晷, therefore 晷 (≈ 眴) ≈ 晷 (眴). More simply, the relation between 晷 (≈ 眴) and 晷 (≈ 眴) is due to the fact that both graphs can be used as loans for *hu* 忽.

At this point, *via* a concatenation of references, let us attempt a more general hypothesis in order to harmonise the diffraction in *Laozi* 41: 昧 [≈ 晷 (≈ 眴) ≈ 忽 ≈ 晷 (≈ 眴)] ≈ 費 ≈ 費 ≈ 悖 ≈ 悖 ≈ 悖 ≈ 悖. In particular, on the connection between 費 and 悖, the following can be added: As 拂 ≈ 莠³² and 拂 ≈ 費³³ and therefore 莠 ≈ 費,³⁴ just as 莠 ≈ 悖,³⁵ thus 費 ≈ 悖.

Two possible interpretations of the same case of diffraction in *Laozi* 41 have therefore been supplied: one by Boltz, who relies upon the criterion of *lectio difficilior* to retrace the legitimate reading to an extrastemmatic solution (*fei* 眴), no more available (diffraction *in absentia*); the other illustrates how it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that the riddle of *variora* in correspondence with the pericope being studied may be solved within the tradition, since this would be a diffraction *in praesentia* (悖 as 1).

It was noted that when all the available variants within the tradition are considered to be “substitute variants” of an absent *lectio difficilior*, which might

29 *Fei yi wu zhi huozi* 費疑即眴之或字 “*Fei*, I sense this is an alternative form for character *wu*”. See Duan Yucai 1807: 135.

30 *Shiji*: 470.

31 *Hanshu* 1231.

32 Among the numerous examples confirming this, mention can be made of the annotation by Yang Liang 楊梁 (9th c.) on line *gai si xiang fu ye* 蓋斯象拂也 (74/19/88) from *Xunzi* 荀子, where the reading *fu* 拂 is compared to *fu* 莠.

33 Such as, for instance, in the passage *junzi zhi dao fei er yin* 君子之道費而隱 of *Liji* 禮記 (31/7), where the annotations by Ruan Yuan 阮元 (1764–1849) confirm that the reading *fei* 費 is alternative to *fu* 拂.

34 Cf. *Zuozhuan* 左傳 (B3.8.3/44/17) “反誅屢於徒人費”, quoted with 莠 for 費 in *Shiji* (1484–1485).

35 Among the numerous sources attesting to this relation, there is the *Zuozhuan* (A12.13.10/454/5) phrase “有星悖于東方”, which appears in *Chunqiu fanlu* 春秋繁露 (9/7b–8a) with 莠 replacing 悖.

or might not be reconstructed, it is necessary to posit an extrastemmatic conjecture and to adopt the principle of *lectio difficilior* together with *emendatio*. A similar phenomenon, immediately connected to the typology of diffraction in *absentia*, was isolated by some scholars in variants of another pericope of *Laozi* 41:

GD B (slip 12)	大器曼(慢?)成	“The Great vessel is slowly(?) completed.”
MWD B	大器免(晚?)成	“The Great vessel takes long(?) to be completed.”
WB	大器晚成	“The Great vessel takes long to be completed.”

The appearance of the character 曼 in GD B leads us to reconsider the meaning ascribed to *mian* 免 “to avoid, to refrain from, to stop doing, to give up”, which is attested in MWD B in contrast to *wan* 晚 “late, to be late, lastly” in the *vulgata*. The reading *man* 曼 “graceful, delicate, elegant”, but also “without, not [...]”, “confused, indistinct”, is identified by many critics with the homophone *man* 慢, “slow, slowly”. However, the GD B version *da qi man cheng* 大器曼成 has induced some scholars to state that *man* 曼 is to be taken as the equivalent of 無 *wu*. Gao Ming refers to the interpretation of Chen Zhu 陳柱, who had already assimilated the reading of the *wan* 晚 in the *vulgata* into *wu* 無 in his *Laozi Hanshishuo* 老子韓氏說.³⁶ I have not had the opportunity to consult Chen Zhu’s study, but I shall try to trace the reasoning that led to this conclusion.

Cross-checking a set of characters to justify the use of *mian* 免 “to refrain from, to dodge”, “to stop” in MWD B, leads to the following conclusion: 免 ≈ 晚 [≈ 勉 ≈ 勿] ≈ 輓 ≈ 曼. *Mian* 免 is a clear variant of *wan* 晚 “slowly, taking a long time”, which is why the reading of MWD B comes as no surprise. But 免 is also often used in place of *mian* 勉 “to strive, to apply oneself with enthusiasm and ardour”, “to stimulate” in sources such as the *Zhanguo ce* 戰國策,³⁷ or the *Zhuangzi* 莊子.³⁸ *Mian* 勉 is in turn used in place of *wu* 勿, as can be seen in the verse *min mian tong xin* 黽勉同心 of the *Shijing* 詩經 (Mao 35), which in Li Shan’s commentary to *Wenxuan* (2735) appears as a quotation from *Hanshi*

36 Gao Ming 1996: 24–25; 2000: 235.

37 *Zhanguo ce* 戰國策 83A/38/14. Line *mian yu guo huan* 免於國患 is traditionally intended with 免 ≈ 勉.

38 *Zhuangzi* 2/1/20 (the line *ci sui mian yu xing* 此雖免乎行 appears in a Tang 唐 codex with 勉 replacing 免); 77/28/12 (*zi jie mian ju yi* 子皆勉居矣, a pericope that appears in the *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽 with the character 勉 replaced by 免).

waizhuan 韓詩外傳 with *mi wu* 密勿 in place of *min mian* 黽勉 and once again in the *Shijing* (Mao 193) verse *min mian cong shi* 黽勉從事, which *Hanshu* 36 (1935) quotes replacing *min mian* 黽勉 with *mi wu* 密勿.³⁹ It is thus already clearly possible to assimilate 免 in MWD B and 晚 in the *vulgata* into a negation like *wu* 勿, a character that can obviously be taken as “equivalent” to *wu* 無.⁴⁰

Setting aside for the moment the reading *wu* 無 as a possible *lectio difficilior in absentia*, the diffraction between MWD B, GD B and the *vulgata* might be explained by considering that the alteration from *mian/wan* 免/晚 to *man* 曼 in GD B can be accounted for by the fact that this character and the two previous ones are loans for *wan* 輓 “to tow, to pull”. *Wan* 輓 is interchangeable with *wan* 晚, as stated in the *Suoyin* 索隱 annotation to *Shiji* pericope *Wan jin shi tu min er mu* 輓近世塗民耳目, where the assimilation of *wan* 晚 and *wan* 輓 is established; but 輓 is also interchangeable with *man* 曼, as in *Shiji* line *Zouren Wanfu zhi mu* 邠人輓父之母, which in the *Liji* is read with *man* 曼 in place of *wan* 輓.⁴¹

Let us now also consider *wu* 無 in relation to the reading that appears in GD B. In the *Xiao Erya* 小爾雅 there is an entry for *man* 曼 glossed with *wu* 無; according to Li Gui 李軌 (*fl.* 317), there is also convincing evidence supporting the equation of *man* with *wu* also in the *Fayan* 法言;⁴² the *Guangya* 廣雅 itself assimilates *man* 曼 and *mo* 莫 to *wu* 無. The further link between *man* 曼 and *wu* 無 can also be seen in the light of the extremely close relationship between *man* 曼 and *man* 縵 “plain, unadorned (*wuwen* 無文)” according to the *Shuowen jiezi*.⁴³

Reconsidering the *Laozi* pericope according to the GD B redaction, the only two pre-Qin works⁴⁴ to mention the line in question match the reading of the *vulgata* and contradict the manuscripts. To conclude on the basis of what has just been stated that the reading *wan* 晚 “late”, as already consolidated since pre-Qin times, would thus reflect the genuine “original” reading, means to *a priori* exclude that the graph in question could actually have been used as a loan for

39 *Hanshu* 1935.

40 Among the innumerable examples, cf. the pericope *wu yi yu* 無遺育 (*Shujing* 16.1039) quoted in *Shiji* 1472 with 勿 in place of 無.

41 *Shiji* 3253, 1906–1907, *Liji* 3/10.

42 Zhu Rongbao and Chen Zhongfu (ed) 1987: 217–218; 268.

43 Cf. the pericopes in *Zhuangzi* 85/30/8, 25 (*man hu zhi ying* 曼胡之纓), quoted in Li Shan’s commentary on the *Wenxuan Weidu* 魏都 rhapsody with *man* 曼 replaced by *man* 縵 (*Wenxuan* 351–352).

44 *Hanfeizi* 韓非子 21.19.38 and *Lüshi chungiu* 呂氏春秋 16.5/94/15.

mian 免, which in turn could have been assimilated into *wu* 無. Besides, the GD B reading *man* 曼 (a loan for 縵 “without embellishment, unadorned”, for some aspects close to the negation *wu* 無) seems on the contrary to suggest that the use of *wan* 晚 in the *vulgata* intended as “late” might rather have established itself as a result of a diffraction, instead of qualifying as the “original reading”.

In other words, the discrepancy between the *vulgata* and the manuscript versions might not necessarily be of a lexical nature. If, as certain scholars such as Chen Xiongen (Chan Hung Kan) 陳雄根⁴⁵ and Jiang Rui (2000)⁴⁶ have speculated, the reading of GD B – and at a stretch even the one in MWD B – could be actually intended as a negation acting as a verbal determinant like *wu* 無 or *wu* 无 (or even *wu* 勿), we would therefore face a diffraction *in absentia*, and the proliferation of discordant *variora* would seem to be due to a faulty interpretation of a character which is not at the moment to be found in any existing witness, and should therefore be reintroduced as a conjecture. Nevertheless, stating that a similar process solves a “real” diffraction *in absentia* is perhaps improper: identifying *man* 曼 in GD B with “neglect, avoid, ignore”⁴⁷ is not far from what some scholars consider to be the absent *lectio difficilior* (*wu* 無).

The question that however springs spontaneously to mind is the following: since textual criticism requires a *lectio difficilior*, whether existing or conjectural, to be sought wherever tradition displays innovations, what features therefore should this *lectio difficilior* have? Is the reading “*wu* 無” truly *difficilior*, compared with the readings of the *vulgata* and the manuscripts? Perhaps not, either with regard to semantic implication or to the complexity of the graph.

At this point, I take into consideration what I think is a perfect example of a probably false lexical variant to be found once more in a Guodian manuscript linked to the *Laozi*. Perhaps, the complexity of the graph at issue lends itself to being understood as a *lectio difficilior*. Nevertheless, the greater graphical complexity is not in itself a guarantee of greater semantic connotation of the word we suppose the graph stands for, just as the graphic simplicity of the variant can refer to a word with a much deeper meaning than indicated by the traditionally accepted reading. In other words, provided the the *lectio difficilior* principle is really reliable, I wonder whether the priority has to be given to graphical or semantical criteria.

45 Chen Xiongen (Chan Hung Kan) 2000.

46 Jiang Rui 2000.

47 Such is, for example, the position of Ding Yuanzhi (1999: 293).

Let us look more closely at the case in hand. In stanza 25 of the *Laozi*, GD A slip 22 reads *da yue* (?) 大曰𠄎 “‘Great’ means (?)”. How should the last graph be read? The variant *shi* 逝 in the silk manuscripts of Mawangdui is a commonplace phonetic loan for *shi* 逝 “to leave, to depart”, “to flee”, “to recede”, “to pass through” in the *vulgata*, but 𠄎 in GD A, transcribed by the editors as 𠄎, is far less commonplace.⁴⁸

To better set the pericope we are examining in its context, I show a longer portion of text according to the *Laozi receptus*, stanza 25:

大曰逝	“Great” means “to depart”.
逝曰遠	“To depart” means “to be far away”.
遠曰返	“To be far away” means “to return”.

In the *codex unicus* on bamboo called *Yucong* 語叢 IV again from Guodian, Peng Hao has shown a graph largely similar to 𠄎, i.e. 𠄎, transcribed as 𠄎 and read as *kui* 愞 (微部) “chaotic, confused, disturbed, stupid”, a synonym of *luan* 亂.⁴⁹ Peng Hao’s annotation justifies this choice by identifying the phonophoric of the character 𠄎 in *dui* 自 (微部). Qiu Xigui extends Peng Hao’s remarks and points out that the same controversial graph in *Yucong* IV also appears among the inscriptions found in the tomb of the Marquis Yi of Zeng (Zeng hou Yi 曾侯乙, c. 433 B.C.) of Leigudun 擂鼓墩, Suizhou 隨州, which would show that the phonophoric could be *xian* 𠄎 (談部) as well as *dui* 自.⁵⁰ Some graphs carved on chime stones – 𠄎 and 𠄎⁵¹ – actually seem to be very close to 𠄎. Qiu Xigui concludes that the character in *Yucong* IV can be identified with *xian* 陷 “be lacking, be wanting, err” (談部), or *yan* 衍 “overflow, flood”, “abundant, copious”, “develop, multiply” (元部). It is certainly from similar premises that Chen Wei⁵² retraces the graph of the *Yucong* IV to *qian* 愆⁵³ “error”, “lack, defect”, “exceed” (元部) to then opt in favour of *qian* 譴 (元部) “error, mistake, lack”, “interrogate, charge with something”, “repress, blame” as the ultimate solution. Also Chen Wei notices a substantial nearness between the graph 𠄎 in

48 *GDCMZJ*: 4; the graph in question is the eighth (punctuation marks excluded) of slip 22 (transcription on page 112, unfortunately scarcely explained in the philological apparatus on page 116, note 53).

49 *GDCMZJ*: 217. This is the tenth character on the bamboo slip 17.

50 *GDCMZJ*: page 219, note 17.

51 Li Shoukui 2003: 447.

52 Chen Wei 2003: 239–240, note 3.

53 Lin Suqing (2000: 393, note 23) is of the same opinion.

Yucong IV and the character 𣎵 on bamboo slip 22 of the GD A, identified by him as *yan* 衍.

The fact that, as shown by Qiu Xigui, the phonophoric of 𣎵/𣎵 could be both *dui* 自 and *xian* 冼 has induced Henricks (2000: 54–56) to formulate a double identification of 𣎵/𣎵 in GD A: *kui* 潰 “confused, receding, overflowing” in the first case, and *han* 涵 “large stagnant pool of water, marsh”, “soak, submerge”, “contain, include” in the second case.⁵⁴

It is plausible to think that 𣎵 must rhyme with *yuan* 遠 “far away” and *fan* 返 “return” that conclude the verses following *da yue shi* 大曰𣎵), both belong to the *yuan* 元 rhyme group. In this regard, Henricks again advances a further possible identification of the mysterious character in GD A, namely as *yuan* 源 “source, cause, origin”, a word that meets the phonetic criteria required and, in addition, fits the context perfectly, although it is a reading not attested in any other available version of the *Laozi*.⁵⁵ Henricks further shows that there are impressive similarities between the graph of GD A and some characters appearing in the manuscripts of Baoshan 包山 (such as 𣎵, 𣎵, 𣎵, 𣎵, 𣎵, 𣎵)⁵⁶ that have been transcribed as 𣎵 by Teng Rensheng (1985: 813). Consequently, the phonophoric could be identified as *qian* 𣎵, and 𣎵 would therefore preserve the rhyme with *yuan* 元, in the same way as the following rhyme words of this portion of *Laozi* stanza 25.⁵⁷

Zhao Jianwei (1999: 272–273) is of a completely different opinion, as he identifies the pronunciation of 𣎵 with the element *tan* 𣎵/𣎵 glossed in the *Shuowen jiezi* with *yu de* 欲得 “greed” or even “eating without ever having enough (*shi bu man* 食不滿)”, assimilated to *lan* 濫 “overflow, submerge, exceed”, which is in turn glossed in the *Shuowen jiezi* as *fan* 汎 “that infuses and overflows, vast, limitless”, “vague and impalpable” – a character that already

54 The interpretation of Zhao Jianwei (1999: 273) follows the same line, where the graph in GD *Laozi A* is considered equivalent to a character included in the text called *Qiong da yi shi* 窮達以時 also from Guodian. The graph in question, *han* 𣎵 “mud, muddy water” (談部), is frequently used as a loan for *han* 涵. The same graph 𣎵 can be used to write the word *yan* “to drown, to sink, to disappear”. Cf. *GDCMZJ*: 27, 145.

55 Henricks bases his argument on the reading *yuan* 源 in old codices of the *Laozi* as recorded by Xia Song 夏竦 in his *Guwen sisheng yun* 古文四聲韻. See Henricks 2000: 56.

56 In order, the characters appear on the following slips: 137 (back), 139 (back), 151, 96, 96, 98. Cf. *Baoshan Chu jian* 1991: XLII, XLIII, LXII, LXIII, LXIX.

57 Li Shoukui (2003: 645–646) identifies the character in GD A and the graphs of the Baoshan documents as elaborate forms of 𣎵 (*qian*?), to be retraced perhaps to the already contemplated *qian* 𣎵 (元部) “error, mistake, lack”, “interrogate, to charge someone with something”, “repress, blame”.

appears in the opening verse of stanza 34 of the *Laozi*. Both the solutions, *lan* 濫 and *fan* 汎, are suitable from the semantic point of view and are compatible with respect to the rhyme in the *yuan* 元 group.

An indication that is really significant for the purpose of identifying the graph 𠄎 in GD A comes from the *Zhouyi* 周易 bamboo manuscript acquired by the Shanghai Museum together with a large number of other works that the majority of scholars presume come from the Chu area and date back to circa 300 B.C. Slip 33 of this manuscript has the graph 𠄎,⁵⁸ glaringly similar to 𠄎 in GD A. The only real distinction lies in the absence in the former of the “water” 水 element, which is laid out “horizontally” in 𠄎. A comparison with the received *Zhouyi*⁵⁹ and its Mawangdui silk manuscript counterpart shows that the graph being examined corresponds with, in order, *shi* 噬 “to bite” and *shi* 筮 (both belonging to the *yue* 月 category, the same as the reading *shi* 逝 in *Laozi receptus*).

The circle seems to have finally closed: The copyists of the two bamboo manuscripts (the Shanghai museum *Zhouyi* and GD A respectively) used the quite similar graphs 𠄎 and 𠄎 to write two almost certainly homophonous words, in the first case *shi* 噬, and in the other a word that in both Mawangdui *Laozi* silk manuscripts is written with the phonetic loan *shi* 筮. Therefore, the word represented by 𠄎 in GD A must belong to the *yue* 月 rhyme group (just like *shi* 噬 and *shi* 筮), which means that *shi* 逝 “to depart” is the most plausible reading.

It still needs to be explained however what the phonophoric of 𠄎 and 𠄎 is. Ikeda Tomohisa 池田知久, in a preliminary research on the Guodian texts, “broke down” the character in GD A into the elements *li* 立 (緝部), *shuai* 帥 (術部), *qian* 欠 (談部), *shui* 水 (微部), *jiu* 臼 (幽/屋部 or, if understood as 𠄎, 談部), *yi* 一, *jin* 巾 (諄部): there is no trace of potential phonophorics belonging to the *yue* 月 rhyme group. However, another possibility, remote but worthy of investigation, must be considered. The graph 𠄎 in the Shanghai Museum codex of the *Zhouyi* is almost certainly a loan or anyway a graphic variant of a character belonging to the *yue* 月 rhyme group, as the “received” reading *shi* 噬 “bite” seems to imply. Considering their graphic nearness, the character in GD A may also share the same phonetic characteristics and rhyme with *yue* 月. This leads us to contemplate that the rhyme-pattern of the three verses corresponding with stanza 25 of the *Laozi* 大曰逝/逝曰遠/遠曰返 according to the traditional

58 Ma Chengyuan 2004: 45, 181.

59 *Zhouyi* 38/46/11.

version is perfectly plausible, and that the unexplained character must be traced, like *shi* 逝, right inside the *yue* 月 rhyme group.⁶⁰

Let us start from 𪗇, which corresponds to *shi* 噬 in the *vulgata* of the *Zhouyi*:

逝 ≈ 噬⁶¹

噬 ≈ 齧⁶²

噬 ≈ 啗⁶³

Not only would there be, in the light of the last assimilation, a nearness between the forms 筮 and 咎, but the suspicion emerges that the element (only presumed at this point) *jiu* 臼 at the bottom of the two still undetermined graphs is in reality to be identified with *chi* 齒 “teeth” (之部).⁶⁴ *Nie* 齧 “bite”, “erode, deteriorate” (月部) or *nie* 嚙 (月部) are variants of *nie* 噬; all three graphs are derived from *chi* 齒. In the light of this, the character in the Shanghai Museum *Zhouyi* would perhaps be better transcribed as 齧, and that of GD A perhaps as 齧 or 齧, thus suggesting (through the use of 齒) that both are loans for 齧, whose phonophoric is *qi* 切 (月部): 齧 ≈ 噬 ≈ 噬 ≈ 筮 ≈ 逝.⁶⁵

60 This rhyme-pattern is as follows: (月部)曰(月部) / (月部)曰(元部) / (元部)曰(元部). A similar pattern is found in stanza 16 of the *Laozi*, and is clearly distinguished from that which is typical, for example, of stanza 55, where the final word of the verse determines the rhyme for the entire portion of the text involved. This means that to understand GD A 𪗇 as standing for a word belonging to the *yuan* 元 and not the *yue* 月 rhyme group (like *da* 大 and like *shi* 逝) could turn out to be misleading. For a further discussion of this problem, see Andreini 2005.

61 Cf. *Shijing* (Mao 123) verse *shi ken shi wo* 噬肯適我. In his *Jingdian shiwen* 經典釋文 Lu Deming 陸德明 (556–627) refers to a quotation from *Hanshi waizhuan* where *shi* 噬 is replaced by *shi* 逝.

62 Cf. *Yanzi Chuqiu* 宴子春秋 3.9/25/1 *gou ying er shi zhi* 狗迎而噬之, in *Hanshi waizhuan* (7.9/51/26) written with *nie* 齧 instead of *shi* 噬.

63 *Shuowen jiezi, kou bu* 口部.

64 He Linyi 1998: 50–51.

65 Still maintaining the final in *yue* 月, it is also plausible to believe that the unexplained character in GD A is not a loan or an adiphorous variant for *shi* 逝. A similar conclusion is supported by Meng Pengsheng 孟蓬生 (2002: 406–408), who admits that the graph in GD A might be a variant of *shi* 滋 “shore, bank of a river”, “rattling”. By identifying the element at the top left in the graph 𪗇 in *Yucong* IV and 𪗇 in GD A not with 𪗇, but with 音, to be understood in its turn as an alteration of *bi* 僻, Meng Pengsheng is led to hypothesise the following: as *nie* 齧 ≈ *que* 缺 “break, snap, open a crack”, “insufficient, defective” (*yue bu* 月部) and *nie* 𪗇 ≈ *que* 缺, so *nie* 齧 ≈ *nie* 𪗇 (*yue bu* 月部). Another character of the *yue* 月

Conclusions

The application of stemmatology requires the acceptance of a high degree of *iudicium*, flexibility and uncertainty, above all in the presence of an open recension, as in the case of many ancient Chinese texts. In other words, analysis with a strictly Lachmannian stamp is certainly not a *panacea* against the misfortunes of textual traditions.⁶⁶

I have tried to underline the risks implicit in the cases of “apparent” lexical *variora*, where the suspected diffraction is explained through orthographical variants or phonetic loans, actually adia-phorous from the semantic point of view. Cases of this type however nullify the adoption of the criterion of *lectio difficilior via conjecture*.

As for the diffraction *in absentia* in Chinese pre-Qin codices, the phenomenon remains highly problematic, simply because the conjectural nature of the *lectio difficilior* forces us to look at a truly enormous number of cases of adia-phorous variants in the form of allographs and phonetic loans. These should lead us back to the obstacle – probably orthographic – to which the proliferation of graphic/lexical variants is to be attributed. In the case of diffraction *in praesentia*, the recourse to *lectio difficilior* must be subordinate, in my opinion, to the adoption of valid internal criteria, such as the *usus scribendi*.

The possibility must then be considered that certain diffraction phenomena are not to be emended. In essence, it might sometimes be inappropriate to retrace the proliferation of lexically differentiated readings back to an obstacle and to identify this single element through its orthographic/phonetic vicissitudes as the cause of an “involuntary” diffraction. In fact the proliferation of readings might also be due to intentional alterations of the basic textual units, the pericopes, which have undergone specific changes in order to fit different contexts. For

rhyme group that derives graphically from 音 is *xie* 斃, which is assimilated in the *Shuowen jiezi* to *duan* 斷 “to cut off, to break”, “interrupt, cease”. The *Shuowen* also underlines the nearness between *duan* 斷 and *zhe* 折 “to break, to snap, to loosen”, that could indirectly justify the adoption of *shi* 逝 in the *Laozi receptus*. According to GD A, “Great” would then mean “to be broken, to loose”.

66 There are various limits in the Lachmannian method, because its applicability presupposes a mechanical reconstruction of the text of the archetype. To be more precise, the effectiveness of the Lachmannian method depends strictly on compliance with ideal conditions, typical of a *closed recension*, that is characterised by a vertical transmission, without contaminations in the upper levels of the *stemma codicum*, and for the possibility of reconstructing the same *stemma* again in its entirety.

instance, the *Laozi* might provide interesting examples of probable voluntary diffractions, intentional revisions of pericopes which followed the cultural and ideological perspectives of the editors responsible for each recension. The examination of a text's tradition therefore requires bearing constantly in mind that each specimen somehow represents a particular edition, in other words a mixture of pre-existing variants, whether genuine or bogus.

The only point on which it is permitted to make definite pronouncements, probably remains the one that the clarification of a specific reading increases with the "length" of a text's tradition. The last example examined in effect confirms that a larger number of codices acquired contributes in any case to improving a text's legibility and thus helps provide elements that can develop increasingly sophisticated hypotheses able to solve cases of diffraction. Certainly we are still ignoring unsuspected textual damage only because the traditions available to us are too short to bring out diffractions, many of which lie unseen and undisturbed for centuries.

Abbreviations

- GD : Guodian 郭店 (A–C for the three mss. with *Laozi* parallels).
 GDCMZJ: *Guodian Chu mu zhujian* (Jingmenshi Bowuguan 1998).
 HSG : Heshang Gong 河上公 (text of the *Laozi*).
 MWD A : Mawangdui 馬王堆, *jia* 甲 ms. of the *Laozi*.
 MWD B : Mawangdui 馬王堆, *yi* 乙 ms. of the *Laozi*.
 WB : Wang Bi 王弼 (text of the *Laozi*).

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Unless otherwise mentioned, the editions of traditional received texts are those of *Sibu beiyao*. References to *Shiji* and *Hanshu* follow the page number of the Zhonghua shuju editions (Beijing 1959–); references to *Wenxuan* follow the page number of *Wenxuan quanyi* 文選全譯 (Guiyang 1994: Guizhou Renmin); references to *Hanfeizi* follow *Hanfeizi suoyin* 韓非子索引 (Beijing 1982: Zhonghua). References to the other texts follow the Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series or the ICS Ancient Chinese Text Concordance Series. Quotations from French and Italian critical essays are given in my own translation, whenever no translated version into English was available.

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