TENTATIVE CRITERIA FOR DISCERNING INDIVIDUAL HANDS IN THE GUODIAN MANUSCRIPTS

Matthias Richter, The University of Chicago (李孟涛・芝加哥大学)

(The present article has appeared in print in: *Rethinking Confucianism: Selected Papers from the Third International Conference on Excavated Chinese Manuscripts, Mount Holyoke College, April 2004*. Wen Xing (ed.). San Antonio: Trinity University, 2006: 132–147.)

The distinction of hands is of importance in the study of early Chinese manuscripts for a number of reasons: First, it is often used as one of the several criteria employed in grouping unearthed or otherwise retrieved pieces of writing and in establishing their correct order to reconstruct the original manuscripts. This has been discussed, for instance, with regard to the Guodian 郭店 mss. *Chengzhi wen zhi* 成之闻之, *Zun de yi* 尊德义 and *Liu de* 六德,[1] and indirectly also with regard to the question of whether *Laozi* C 老子丙 and *Tai yi sheng shui* 太一生水 must be considered one manuscript or two separate ones – a question which is not only of consequence with regard to the textual history of – in this case – *Laozi*, but may also influence our general picture of early Chinese philosophical and political thought as a whole. The latter two groups of slips are treated as one manuscript by Cui Renyi.[2] Wang Bo argues that these slips do not necessarily belong together as one manuscript, just because they share the same format and layout as well as the same style of script. In support of his argument he observes that with regard to these features the *Cheng zhi wen zhi*, *Zun de yi*, *Xing zi ming chu*, and *Liu de* slips are alike as well.[3] However, as becomes apparent from Chen Wei's account

---

1 I use here the order and titles of the Guodian manuscripts as given in Jingmen shi bowuguan (ed.), *Guodian Chu mu zhujian* 郭店楚墓竹簡 (Beijing: Wenwu, 1998). This is done simply to ensure unambiguous reference and does not imply any judgement on their correctness or preference over other suggested orders and titles of the manuscript texts.

2 Cui Renyi 崔仁义, *Jingmen Guodian Chu jian* Laozi *yanjiu* 荆门郭店楚简《老子》研究 (Beijing: Kexue, 1998).

3 Cf. Wang Bo 王博, "Guan yu Guodian Chu mu zhujian fen pian yu lianzhui de ji dian xiangfa" 关于郭店楚墓竹简分篇与连缀的几点想法, *Zhongguo zhexue* 中国哲学 21 (2000), 250.

of different proposed reconstructions of manuscripts from these slips,[4] it is all but certain which of the slips, and in which particular order, ought to be considered as one integral text. Moreover, even if this problem were solved beyond doubt, we could still not be certain whether one manuscript, in the sense of a codicological unit, comprised several such textual units or only one (or perhaps even less).[5] I suspect that *Cheng zhi wen zhi*, *Zun de yi*, *Xing zi ming chu*, and *Liu de* were written in the same style but not necessarily in only one hand, whereas *Laozi* C and *Tai yi sheng shui* were actually written in the same hand and thus most probably by the same scribe. If so, this would rather support the assumption that the latter two belong together as one manuscript.

Second, once the manuscripts have been reconstructed with some certainty, observations about their handwriting may yield additional information about the mode of manuscript production. Knowing which manuscripts (or which parts of them) were written in the same hand, and thus in all likelihood by the same scribe, also leads to a clearer picture of the degree of arbitrariness or uniformity that was applied in writing the examined manuscripts and thus helps judging the variants encountered in them. Moreover, in the case of larger corpora, knowing what was written by the same scribe or by scribes of the same school contributes to understanding the composition of a given corpus and the significance of a manuscript's position within the corpus.

The manuscript corpora excavated from early Chinese tombs often contain texts of different persuasions. It is, for instance, a common feature of the two perhaps most famous of such manuscript collections – i.e. those of Mawangdui 马王堆 and Guodian – that they both contain texts commonly labelled Confucian as well as others labelled Daoist. It has been suspected for quite some time by a number of scholars that the notion of clearly distinct

---

4 Cf. Chen Wei 陈伟, *Guodian zhushu bieshi* 郭店竹书别释 (Wuhan: Hubei jiaoyu, 2003), 83–108.

5 For a discussion of the relation between textual and codicological units see Marc Kalinowski, "La production des manuscrits dans la Chine ancienne: une approche codicologique de la bibliothèque funéraire de Mawangdui", forthcoming in: *Asiatische Studien / Études Asiatiques* LIX (2005.1).

schools represented by textual lineages in Early China is very much a projection of later views into the past. As has recently been pointed out again by Mark Csikszentmihalyi and Michael Nylan, Early Chinese texts should instead be seen rather as formulations of different kinds of expertise deemed useful under different circumstances.[6] However, even if these texts are not expressions of mutually exclusive ideologies, they do nevertheless focus on different subjects, advise different attitudes to life and legitimise or otherwise support their ideas by attaching them to different authorities. If we could ascertain which of them were laid down in writing by the same people, at the same place of production, applying the same standards for book production, this might help us answer the intricate questions of how they were actually understood at their time and why they were buried in the same tomb. The tomb occupants may have studied or otherwise used some of the texts during their lifetime, others they may have received as a gift in life, or the manuscripts may have been bestowed upon them for their benefit in the netherworld, perhaps some or all of these writings were produced specially for the occasion of the funeral, to name just a few of the many possibilities.

If we understand a manuscript corpus as a meaningful composition and seek to find out what role the individual manuscripts played as parts of this composition, we must take into account not only the content of the manuscript texts, but also various other features of these manuscripts as material objects, such as their position in the tomb, the materials and formats of writing support, the text layout, types and styles of script and finally the handwriting in the narrower sense of a "visible record of movement",[7] its degree of diligence on both calligraphic and orthographic levels, as well as punctuation and corrections. Manuscripts that have some of these features in common and were perhaps written by scribes of the same school or even by the very same scribe, may have been understood at their time to be more

---

6 Mark Csikszentmihalyi and Michael Nylan, "Constructing Lineages and Inventing Traditions through Exemplary Figures in Early China," *T'oung Pao* 89.1–3 (2003), 59–99.

7 Albert S. Osborn, *Questioned Documents* (Albany, N.Y.: Boyd Printing Company, ^{2}1929 [^{1}1910]), 101.

closely related also with regard to their content than manuscripts produced in vastly different fashions.

In the case of the Guodian corpus, if we group the manuscripts by styles of script as Li Ling does in his *Guodian Chu jian jiaoduji*, we get five groups of manuscripts more or less homogeneous with regard to their formats and content.[8] Seeing these clearly different styles of script, one is tempted to jump to the conclusion that they were written by different scribes. Although this may well be so in practice, we must be aware that it is not a methodologically sound conclusion, because we cannot rule out that one scribe wrote different texts in different styles of script. It is even highly probable that professional scribes usually mastered several types and styles of script.[9]

Therefore, it is necessary that in our perception and description of handwriting we distinguish as clearly as possible between the levels of (1) types and (2) styles of script and (3) hands. As *types of script* I understand writings that consistently share the same essential morphological qualities, i.e. a degree of consistence in structure and shape of characters that, based on the recognisability of character components, ensures legibility within a certain scope. Types of early Chinese script are commonly understood as typical of a certain stage in the historical development of the script or characteristic of certain regions or applications of writing (both with regard to the material of writing support or the practical use of the

---

8 Cf. Li Ling 李零, *Guodian Chu jian jiaoduji: zengding ben* 郭店楚简校读记—增订本 (Beijing: Beijing daxue, 2002), 凡例 3–5. The least homogeneous group with regard to the formats of writing support is that comprising the three groups of slips with *Laozi* counterparts plus the *Taiyi sheng shui* slips and the *Yu cong* 4. Yet, they seem to be related not only in style of script, but also in content. Li Ling calls *Yu cong* 4 Daoist in the wider sense ("其内容也属于广义的道家", p.44).

9 In the early second century B.C.E. Zhangjiashan 张家山 manuscripts there is evidence of a regulation stipulating that professional scribes had to be proficient in the eight types resp. styles of script (*ba ti* 八体), probably identical with those described by Xu Shen 许慎 in his postface to the *Shuowen* 说文. Cf. Li Xueqin 李学勤, "Shi shuo Zhangjiashan jian *Shi lü*" 试说张家山简《史律》, *Wenwu* 文物 2002.4, 69–72 as well as Zhangjiashan 247 hao Han mu zhujian zhengli xiaozu, *Zhangjiashan Han mu zhujian (247 hao mu)* 张家山汉墓竹简（二四七号墓）(Beijing: Wenwu, 2001), 46 [col. 475] and 203.

document in question).[10] The type of script of the Guodian manuscripts might be called Warring States brush-written Chu-script.[11]

The second level is the *style of script*. By style I understand the fashion in which a certain type of script is executed; styles may vary in the degree of regularity or elaboration of otherwise identical graphic structures or individual strokes, they may also vary with regard to the speed of writing, to spacing, slant and all other features that are likewise criteria for discerning individual hands – the difference between these two levels lying in the fact that several hands can share features of the same style (and even more so of the same type) of script. A style, being the intermediate level between type of script and a particular hand, can be typical of a certain school of scribes or even of an entire region or period.[12] In distinguishing styles, as in handwriting analysis in general, neutral descriptive terms should be given preference over classification in terms of artistic value.

---

10 The concept of types of script as well as its distinction from script styles needs further elaboration. Since types of script, as I understand the term here, are constituted according to criteria belonging to different categories, overlaps are unavoidable. "Bronze inscriptions", for example, are often understood as a type of script. However, this rather broad concept is predominantly defined by the material of writing support and consequently the method of inscribing, it is still fairly well-defined with regard to practical use, but almost entirely undefined with regard to time and space. "Small seal" as a type of script is undefined with regard to material of writing support and regional characteristics and cannot even be reliably understood as always representing a certain stage in the development of the writing system. As these examples show, clearer delineations can only be achieved by defining the types very narrowly (e.g. "late fourth century B.C.E. weapon inscriptions from Zhongshan 中山"), which again becomes inexpedient when types are defined so narrowly that they comprise only few specimens of writing and thus lose their function as ordering principles.

11 It has been proposed by Li Xueqin 李学勤 that the plain style script of *Tang Yu zhi dao* 唐虞之道 and *Zhong xin zhi dao* 忠信之道 is not Chu script. Cf. Sarah Allan and Crispin Williams (eds.), *The Guodian* Laozi*: Proceedings of the International Conference, Dartmouth College, May, 1998* (Berkeley: Society for the Study of Early China and Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 2000) 178 (resp. p.188 of the Chinese translation by Xing Wen 邢文, titled *Guodian Laozi: Dong-Xifang xuezhe de duihua* 郭店老子—东西方学者的对话, Beijing: Xueyuan, 2002). For lack of palaeographic experience, I can neither contend nor content myself with this assertion. In order to confidently agree with judgements of this kind, one would need to know the specific features on which they are founded.

12 In his excellent study on the analysis of mediaeval handwriting, Léon Gilissen points out that style is the perhaps least well-defined category in palaeographic studies, and most difficult to grasp, as it is an extremely complex phenomenon: "En effet, le style n'est pas un 'élément' juxtaposable au ductus, au module ni même à la forme; il convenient plutôt de le concevoir comme une totalité: c'est une manière d'être qui se répercute sur tous les éléments de l'écriture, qui affecte et qui marque le phénomène entier. […] le style réside dans la 'manière' particulière à un scribe, à une école et à une époque, d'exécuter ce que l'on a appelé les 'essentiels morphologiques' qui permettent la lecture des signes." Léon Gilissen, *L'expertise des écritures médiévales* (Les publications de Scriptorium 6, Gand: Éditions Scientifiques E. Story-Scientia S.P.R.L., 1973), 50.

Slightly deviating from Li Ling's classification, I distinguish four styles of script in the Guodian corpus (counting Li Ling's first two styles as subgroups of one style):

style	groups of slips	characteristics
A	*Laozi* A–C 老子 甲、乙、丙 *Tai yi sheng shui* 太一生水	elaborate, regular, controlled
A/A*	*Yu cong* 语丛 4	(intermediary between A and A*)
A*	*Zi yi* 缁衣 *Lu Mu gong wen Zisi* 鲁穆公问子思 *Qiong da yi shi* 穷达以时 *Wu xing* 五行	casual, cursive form of A
B	*Tang Yu zhi dao* 唐虞之道 *Zhong xin zhi dao* 忠信之道	plain, static, unadorned, straight strokes
C	*Cheng zhi wen zhi* *Zun de yi* 尊德义 *Xing zi ming chu* 性自命出 *Liu de* 六德	dynamic, flourishing, broad, "baroque", wavy and "willow-leaf" strokes
D	*Yu cong* 语丛 1–3	elaborate, ornamental, slender, reminiscent of weapon inscriptions

The third level is the execution of a certain style in particular *hands*. It is a common phenomenon that a certain amount of text – be it a manuscript of some length or several manuscripts – is written in the same style but by several persons and thus in different hands. As mentioned above, a hand is characterised by the same features as a certain style of writing, but expressions of different hands must be sought in yet more minute details than those by which we characterise a certain style of writing. Furthermore, it is important not to confuse the concept of a hand with that of a particular scribe. Different scribes, even if they were trained in the same school and acquired the same ductus there, will hardly ever write identically to such a degree that their writings are no longer discernible as different hands; there is but the faintest theoretical possibility of ever encountering such a case.[13] On the other

13 Léon Gilissen's methodological caveat concerning the relation between ductus and hand equally pertains to Chinese manuscripts: "Invoquer l'identité de ductus pour conclure notamment à l'identité de scribe est manifestement une erreur. Mais cette pratique est vraiment symptomatique du dénuement méthodologique dans lequel se trouvent les experts confrontés aux problèmes d'identification de main: ils sont tentés d'accorder aux éléments de l'écriture mis en relief, au ductus notamment, une valeur absolue, alors qu'ils

hand, one scribe may have written in different hands in different periods of his life.[14] For ancient Chinese manuscripts these observations are perhaps of marginal importance – different hands *within one manuscript* can hardly be ascribed to the same person, because all parts of a manuscript were likely written at about the same time.[15] With *different manuscripts* in different hands it is well possible that the same person wrote them in different periods of his life.

As a rule, also in handwriting analysis of documents written in alphabetical script, one moves from the general impression to specific details.[16] The relevant details range from layout features (such as utilisation of space, size of characters, spacing) to morphologic and orthographic peculiarities as well as features of the single strokes (e.g. writing speed, pressure, saturation with ink / frequency of replenishment, inclination and connection of strokes). Especially features of ductus, such as the sequence of strokes and features of the execution of strokes provide the more important, though not the only criteria.

The distinction of hands in early Chinese manuscripts encounters some special problems: The most acutely felt of them is, perhaps, the general lack of a methodological basis for the study of early Chinese handwriting according to proved and tested criteria. The established methods of research in handwriting both in China and the West have all been

---

n'en ont qu'une très relative, dans des enquêtes autres que celles de l'histoire de l'écriture. […] En général, le ductus ne peut aider efficacement à l'identification d'une main qui, très souvent au moyen âge, pratique une calligraphie, c'est-à-dire une écriture publique et non une écriture privée." Léon Gilissen, *L'expertise des écritures médiévales*, 8 and 41.

14 Every individual's handwriting has a certain degree of variability, some more, some less. But in Western handwriting analysis it is generally assumed that the non-structural features, i.e. the minute details of a person's handwriting show a high degree of constancy in the period between adolescence and old age, whereas in youth and old age an interval even as short as a year can produce a considerable difference – changes in youth showing a directed development, moving towards increasing constancy of forms, whereas those in old age are more irregular, often due to physiological instability. Usually decreasing speed results in an instability of individual strokes or lines. There is also an overlapping of factors to be observed here. The degree of skill is partly dependent on age (a young person not having acquired a certain degree of skill or an old one having lost it by lack of practice or waning strength). Thus, not knowing the circumstances of writing but only its result, it may be difficult to distinguish between "the clumsy hesitation of the illiterate and the palsied feebleness of age". (Osborn, *Questioned Documents*, 98.)

15 Moreover, in the case of wooden or bamboo manuscripts, if the change does not occur within a single slip, there is at least the possibility that the same person inserted some slips with additions or corrections or other alterations into a manuscript that he had written much earlier in his life.

16 Cf. Christian Grafl, "Die Forensische Handschriftuntersuchung," in *Handschrift* ed. Wilhelm Hemecker (Wien: Paul Zsolnay, 1999), 103 and Gilissen, *L'expertise des écritures médiévales*, 8–9.

shaped to study different objects and serve different purposes. Thus they can only partially be of use for studying early Chinese manuscripts and must be adapted for our purposes. Graphology – although dealing with products of habitual writing – is interested in handwriting as an expression of the writer's psychology, which is a concern entirely different from ours. Forensic handwriting analysis aims at the detection of forgeries, and thus concentrates very much on how writers consciously influence their handwriting. The detection of forgeries will undoubtedly play an increasingly important role also with regard to early Chinese manuscripts, and the acquisition by the Shanghai museum of Warring States Chu manuscripts from the Hong Kong antique market in 1996 shows the great responsibility borne by those who decide upon the genuineness of the manuscripts to be published. However, in the study of early Chinese manuscripts we will hardly ever be confronted with the task of comparing a suspected forgery of a particular known handwriting with genuine samples of the same hand. In the Chinese tradition the appraisal of handwriting predominantly takes the perspective of calligraphy, which is more or less understood as a form of artistic expression, and is thus mostly informed by artistic criteria. The three approaches roughly sketched above do have some of their concerns in common (e.g. the study of calligraphy does deal with questions of authenticity and with writing as an expression of personality) and some aspects of them are useful in studying early Chinese manuscripts.

There is much more common ground with the study of ancient and mediaeval Western manuscripts. Yet, compared to the study of Western manuscripts, we must cope with the great disadvantage that we know next to nothing about the actual circumstances and modes of manuscript production in Early China. However, for early China as well as for Western mediaeval scriptoria, we cannot assume – unless there is any positive evidence pointing in that direction – that the scribes strove to express their personalities in their handwriting or that they aspired to brilliance in the sense of producing a piece of art, nor will they usually have forged somebody else's handwriting. As a rule, we will assume that they were specially

trained artisans who laid down in writing a text as they were told and therein conformed to certain conventions that were not of their own choice. Their handwriting must be understood as depersonalised to a high degree.[17]

The extremely limited accessibility of the original manuscript is a severe obstacle for any serious study of handwriting, because the judgement of details must as a rule be based on the scrutiny of the original, which cannot be substituted even by the combination of high quality photos and a strong magnifying lens.[18] Nevertheless, if the original is not available, it does make sense to work with the best possible reproduction, while keeping in mind the factor of uncertainty involved. A further difficulty is brought about by the soft writing instrument. It is much easier to find out exactly at what angle a Western mediaeval scribe held his stylus or pen than to conclude from the strokes of a brush-written manuscript how exactly the scribe held his writing instrument. On the other hand, while the weight, the pressure of the hand, can in the case of most hard writing instruments only be seen from closely inspecting the writing support, usually with the help of a strong magnifying lens or even microscope, the soft brush manifestly translates the vertical movement of the hand into the shape of the stroke on the horizontal surface.

Another problem is the fact that distinguishing hands demands the observation of a large number of recurrent graphic elements. Even very short texts in alphabetic writing provide a fair amount of comparable graphs. Handwriting analysis is largely independent of the content of such a document, because the same letters recur in basically the same size and shape in completely different words. In the case of Chinese texts, analysis must concentrate on those characters that occur most often in the examined documents as well as on especially frequent characters components.[19] The characteristic features of a particular handwriting are

---

17 Cf. Gilissen's remarks about the "dépersonnalisation du ductus" in *L'expertise des écritures médiévales*, 40–41.

18 Especially the number and order of strokes cannot be reliably determined on the basis of photographs.

19 It must be kept in mind that these components vary in size and shape due to their different positions and combinations in different characters much more than Latin letters in an alphabetical text do.

not of equal weight as criteria for the distinction of hands. Frequent and simple forms that are primarily determined by habitual automatic movement of the hand are stronger criteria than complex forms, the execution of which is to a greater degree subject to conscious choice.

I will in the following give one example of what I assume are different hands within one manuscript. Based on the discussion of this singular example I will formulate a few preliminary principles which I deem useful for discerning hands in early Chinese manuscripts.

Among the first ten slips of the *Laozi* A manuscript, slips five and six stand out for several reasons (see fig.1). The overall impression of the writing on these two slips (henceforth. hand B, as opposed to hand A of the rest of the manuscript) is less balanced, more dynamic, with thicker and more crowded strokes than that of the preceding and following columns. A closer look at the quality of individual strokes in some characters of columns five and six gives the same impression. The strokes seem to be executed with less control of thickness in slips five and six than they are in the other slips. In other words, they are more dynamic in the sense that there is more weight on the brush at the beginning of strokes, resulting in a pronounced head, and in drawing out the stroke the brush is lifted more swiftly, which results in pointed ends and gives some short horizontal strokes an almost triangular shape, a feature that is especially prominent in some of the Chu manuscripts of the Shanghai museum (e.g. *Min zhi fu mu* 民之父母, *Rongcheng shi* 容成氏 and *Heng xian* 亙先): e.g. hand B  or  vs. hand A  or  .[20]

[20] Examples in order of appearance: hand B #1.5.24, 1.6.24; hand A #1.10.19, 1.12.2. The three parts, separated by dots, of the numbers given for the characters signify: number of manuscript (according to the 1998 Wenwu edition), number of columns and number of character on the column.

Narrowness and greater swiftness can also be observed in forms like 八, 大, 口 and 曰:

e.g. hand B  or  vs. hand A  or  ,[21] where the middle left 口 and the upper left 大 components in hand B are narrower and have shorter horizontals with a more pronounced downward bend than their equivalents in hand A. The same features are apparent in characters like 古 or 足: e.g. hand B  or  vs. hand A  or  .[22]

The distinctive features of the suspected hand B in slips five and six of the *Laozi* A manuscript are typical also of the manuscripts in style A*:

e.g.  , to show just a few examples.[23]

Up to this point, one might suspect that the features distinguishing the characters written on slips five and six from those of the preceding and following slips are due to the use of a different brush and/or different quality of ink and/or surface of writing support, all of which could (with different degrees of probability) but need not indicate a change of hand. But in the following I will show that these differences coincide with others that cannot be explained as resulting from different qualities of writing tools and material.

The equivalent of "为" – whether as an independent character or as part of a character – occurs in 4 distinctive forms in the Guodian manuscripts written in style A (see fig.2):

1	2a	2b	2c	3	4
					
(#1.2.23)	(#1.8.7)	(#2.4.3)	(#3.11.1)	(#2.3.12)	(#1.6.11)

Laozi A as a rule uses type 1 (which occurs nowhere else) and type 2. *Laozi* B has types 2 and 3, whereas *Laozi* C and *Tai yi sheng shui* have only type 2. *Yu cong* 4 has both types 2 and 4. The one instance of type 4 in *Laozi* A is clearly an exception. Nowhere else in *Laozi* A–C or

---

21 Examples in order of appearance: hand B #1.6.6, 1.6.8; hand A #1.14.3, 1.15.11.

22 Examples in order of appearance: hand B #1.5.6, 1.6.7; hand A #1.11.8, 1.2.4.

23 Examples in order of appearance: *Zi yi* #5.30.5, 5.42.21, 5.39.4, 5.28.1, 5.28.6, 5.35.10, 5.35.17; *Lu Mu gong wen Zisi* #6.3.1; *Qiong da yi shi* #7.12.7.

Tai yi sheng shui does this form occur. Its repeated occurrence in *Yu cong* 4, the group of slips written in the intermediary style A/A*, and its appearance as the standard form in the manuscripts written in the more cursive style A* show that type 4 is a distinctive feature of style A* as opposed to style A. The exceptional use of this character form on slip six of the *Laozi* A manuscript alone does not necessarily indicate a different hand, as the same scribe could very well have used this form once for a change, just as he alternated between types 1 and 2 elsewhere in the manuscript. But, taken as one of several features that simultaneously change in a particular part of this manuscript, it must be taken into account as an indication of a possible change of hand.

A more complex example is that of the equivalent of "者". Here, three types can be distinguished (see fig.3):

1	1(abbrev.)	2	3	3	3
					
(#1.7.5)	(#1.37.6)	(#2.3.14)	(#18.21.3)	(#1.6.22)	(#6.5.21)

Again, the forms in *Laozi* B, C and *Tai yi sheng shui* (type 2) differ from those in *Laozi* A (type 1), *Yu cong* 4 uses a form only slightly different from type 2, i.e. type 3. The exceptional form on slip six of *Laozi* A is very similar to this type. As in the case of 为, this exceptional form is also common in the style A* manuscripts. An interesting feature of both the full and abbreviated forms of 者 in *Laozi* A is the upward slant of the horizontals that is absent from the exception in slip 6 (see fig.4). This upward slant of ca. 20 to 25 degrees is typical of the hand of *Laozi* A, as will be seen in the following examples.

The character representing the word *zhī* {之}[24] is one of the most frequent in the manuscripts. It is uniformly composed of four strokes, two of which run from top left to

[24] Brace brackets { } indicate that the enclosed character is used only to identify the word in question, regardless of other possible ways to write the same word, especially the one in which it is written in the examined manuscripts. Herein, I follow the convention of Qiu Xigui, *Chinese Writing:* 文字学概要, transl. Gilbert L. Mattos, Jerry Norman (Berkeley: Society for the Study of Early China, Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 2000).

bottom right. The one running from top to bottom and the remaining one that runs from left to right I will, regardless of their true degree of inclination, conveniently call vertical and horizontal (see fig.5a–b). Again, the two instances of the character in columns 5 and 6 of *Laozi* A differ from all others of the manuscript. The angle between their vertical and horizontal strokes is ca. 80°, i.e. almost a right angle, whereas in all other instances in *Laozi* A they form an acute angle of between 40 to 70°. The wide angle of about 80° is, however, quite common in *Laozi* B, C, *Tai yi sheng shui* and *Yu cong* 4. This distinctive feature is not revealed by a superficial look at the characters, because the slant of the whole character often varies in all these manuscripts so that the dominant "vertical" stroke is often nearly or exactly vertical and the "horizontal" occasionally nearly horizontal. In the writing of this character the distinctive feature is not the angle of a stroke in relation to the column, which could easily vary with a slight change in the writing position of the scribe or his shifting the writing support. What really distinguishes different hands, is the relation of elements *within* a character – a feature which is much more firmly bound to writing habits developed in training and practice and is not as likely to change under the influence of external factors such as the writing position of the scribe. Although the relation of strokes within the character is the strong criterion, the weak criterion of the overall slant of the character should also be noted. In the *Laozi* A manuscript it is often ca. 20 to 25° (just like the horizontals of 者), which is steeper than that in almost all instances of the other three manuscripts. Moreover, the vertical stroke in the hand of *Laozi* A always crosses the two diagonals or touches the horizontal at the bottom of the left of the two diagonal strokes, it has a rather pronounced head, indicating that the direction of the brush changed immediately after the beginning, when the brush was drawn to the left instead of straight downwards. It is this change of direction that causes the acute angle in relation to the horizontal stroke. The vertical stroke in the other hand has both a pointed head and tail, it goes almost straight downward in a very slight bend, so that it gets thicker in the middle, somewhat reminiscent of a willow leaf stroke:

hand A	other hand	
		
(#1.10.26)	(#1.6.10)	(#2.9.24)

The word *cǐ* 此 is in column 6 again written differently from the rest of the manuscript (see fig.6). The structure of the left hand 止-component varies also in the typical *Laozi* A hand, but the slant of the character in this hand is always different from that in column six and the other manuscripts written in the same style of script. In the examples from columns ten and eleven, the slant of the left hand component (27 and 28°) is in the same range as that of the horizontals of 之 and 者. The slant of the right hand component in the characters written in the *Laozi* A hand ranges from 54 to 61°, whereas in the *Tai yi sheng shui* examples it is 82 and 85° and in the exception from column six even 101°. Again, not only the weak criterion of position in relation to the column but also the strong criterion of relation of strokes within the character distinguishes the character of column 6 from the others. The angle between the left and right hand components is 26 and 29° in columns 10 and 11, where the usual form of the left hand 止 component is applied, and it is 55° in the example using the simplified form of this component. In the examples written in other hands the angle ranges from 71 to 100°. As in the preceding examples, *Laozi* A is written in a hand clearly distinct from that of the other manuscripts written in style A or A*. Column six resembles the latter much more closely than the rest of *Laozi* A.

Such detailed measurements may appear rather unnecessary and may seem to betray an exaggerated belief in the possibility of objective judgements, but they do in the end provide more reliable criteria for difficult decisions about what constitutes a different hand. It is just because the scribes did not write like machines but with their individual degrees of variability, that we should establish the exact degree to which the features varied. Only then we may reliably describe a certain hand as opposed to another. This is not meant to exclude but rather

to support the subjective judgement that is always necessary to come to a decision about different hands. All such judgements can only be based on probability. Examples of variation that cannot be explained by change of hand or are very unlikely to be due to different hands must be registered as an expression of the variability of the same hand:

For instance, the change from 𠂤 to 𦥑 as the bottom of the character 與 is rather conspicuous, but it cannot be used as a criterion for the distinction of hands in the style A manuscripts (see fig.7a). The characters #1.35.19+24 that use 𠂤 and 𦥑 respectively are both on the same piece of slip #35b and occur in parallel phrases with *yǔ* 与 (與) in the counterpart of the beginning of received *Laozi* chapter 44 (including #1.36.4 on the adjoining slip): “名与身孰亲身与货孰多得与亡孰病”. The decision not to use this variation as a criterion is backed up by the observation that the variations in the shape of the hand-component show no regularity and do not coincide with other variations (see fig.7b).

The different shapes of the character 也 at first sight seem to be a distinctive feature setting the *Laozi* A manuscript off against the other four manuscripts in the same style (see fig.8). In the former the top right stroke runs downward slightly bent to the left, often merging with the left part of the character rather than with the tail stroke. In the latter four manuscripts that stroke starts from a point further left, runs as a straight diagonal towards bottom right and then merges with the tail stroke, producing an angle where the two strokes of different directions meet. However outstanding this difference seems, a closer look shows that it is a gradual one. Moreover, the two forms alternate in the style A* manuscripts in a way that cannot be explained as due to different scribes.

To sum up, among the manuscripts in style A (*Laozi* A–C, *Tai yi sheng shui* and *Yu cong* 4), *Laozi* A clearly employs a hand different from the others. However, slips five and six are written in a different hand that closely resembles the manuscripts written in style A*, which can be shown by a number of different features. The identification of hand A as

responsible for the *Laozi* A slips, in contrast to the other manuscripts in the same style of script, is of even more consequence than the detection hand B in slips five and six of *Laozi* A. This finding allows the assumption that *Laozi* A stands out among the slips bearing counterparts to the transmitted *Laozi* not only by its larger and more elaborate format but also because it was written by another person. There are several conceivable reasons for this: The scribe of hand A may have been replaced for a short while during the production of *Laozi* A by the scribe who wrote in hand B, or the two slips may later have been damaged or found to contain mistakes and therefore have been replaced. The possibility that during the reconstruction of the manuscripts after the excavation in 1993 slips five and six were mistakenly inserted in this place, can be excluded on grounds of the text flow. A study of the reasons for this change of hand in *Laozi* A is far beyond the scope of the present article, and I fear the scarcity of data leaves but little hope of ever finding a reliable answer to this riddle.

It must be stressed again that none of the distinctive features discussed above – different overall impression, different quality of strokes, morphological differences of certain characters, slant of characters in relation to column, angle between lines within characters – alone and by themselves permit the identification of hands, but it is their simultaneous occurrence in contrast to the preceding and following text that allows this conclusion. This is all the more important when, as in this case, the arguments are all confined to features of morphology and ductus. A hand should usually be identified on a much broader basis, including layout features such as size of characters and spacing as well as punctuation. Due to their greater irregularity and lower frequency, these features are more difficult issues than their counterparts in alphabetical writing are, and need further study.[25]

---

25 One could, for instance, point out the occurrence of two tadpole marks in *Laozi* A as a distinctive feature. But then, the frequency of punctuation is too low to base any sound conclusions on them. *Laozi* B has only about one third, and *Laozi* C and *Tai yi sheng shui* each about one quarter of the amount of text as compared to *Laozi* A. So the two marks in the much longer *Laozi* A manuscript do not necessarily show a different convention of punctuation.

Based on the observations made up to this point, I propose the following tentative assumptions and working principles:

(1) Decisions on the question of different hands should be based not only on a general impression but on specific features of the script. However, one has to base decisions on probabilities and in the end on one's subjective judgement.

(2) An important prerequisite for judging features of handwriting is the familiarity with a large amount of writing of the respective period, in order not to falsely attribute certain features to a particular scribe that are in reality conventions shared by a group of people.[26]

(3) One of the assumptions with regard to probability is that scribes, even if they wrote with a high degree of variability, did not change several features simultaneously within the same text, unless we can see any conceivable reason why they should have done so.

(4) If only one feature changes, one has to be very cautious in attributing the variation to a change of scribe. Differences in only one feature should as a rule not be considered sufficient proof for different hands. A hand should be identified by a combination of features, the particular combination must be determined individually for each case.[27] Distinctive features should appear with a degree of constancy that clearly sets them off against the writing of other hands.

(5) Changes in forms that are deliberately chosen are weaker criteria for the distinction of hands than forms that are subject to trained, automatic movement of the hand. Non-structural features such as the quality of individual strokes are stronger criteria than structural ones;

---

26 "Errors in the identification of handwriting, as emphasized in other connections, are perhaps most frequently made by mistaking the system qualities, or the common national features, for individual characteristics and basing a conclusion thereon. These general features necessarily often have force as pointing to a writer of a particular class but not by them alone to an individual of that class, and this appplies to all general characteristics that are the outgrowth of system, nationality, or occupation." (Osborn, *Questioned Documents*, 258.)

27 The principle to determine a hand not by a single criterion but by a combination of features is pointed out, for example, by Christian Grafl: "Die Identifizierung einer Person als Urheber einer Handschrift hängt von der Feststellung einer individuellen Merkmalskombination in der fraglichen Schrift ab, die innerhalb der Variationsbreite der Vergleichsschriften liegt." (Grafl, "Die Forensische Handschriftuntersuchung", 110.)

relational parameter are stronger criteria than absolute ones (e.g. the angle of a character in relation to the column can change when the scribe changes his position, but the angles between strokes within a character still follow his habit of writing).

(6) The hand of a scribe is subject to change over time, and a professional scribe likely mastered different styles and types of script, thus different styles and even different hands do not necessarily indicate different scribes.

(7) The plainer or more casual a style is, the more it betrays characteristics of a hand; elaborated, ornamented styles (*Yu cong* 1–3, *Cheng zhi wen zhi* / *Zun de yi* / *Xing qing lun* / *Liu de*) with their more conscious treatment of individual strokes probably employ more deliberate variation and thus do not betray as easily what was written by one scribe.

figure 1: slips 1-10 of *Laozi* A (1998 Wenwu edition)

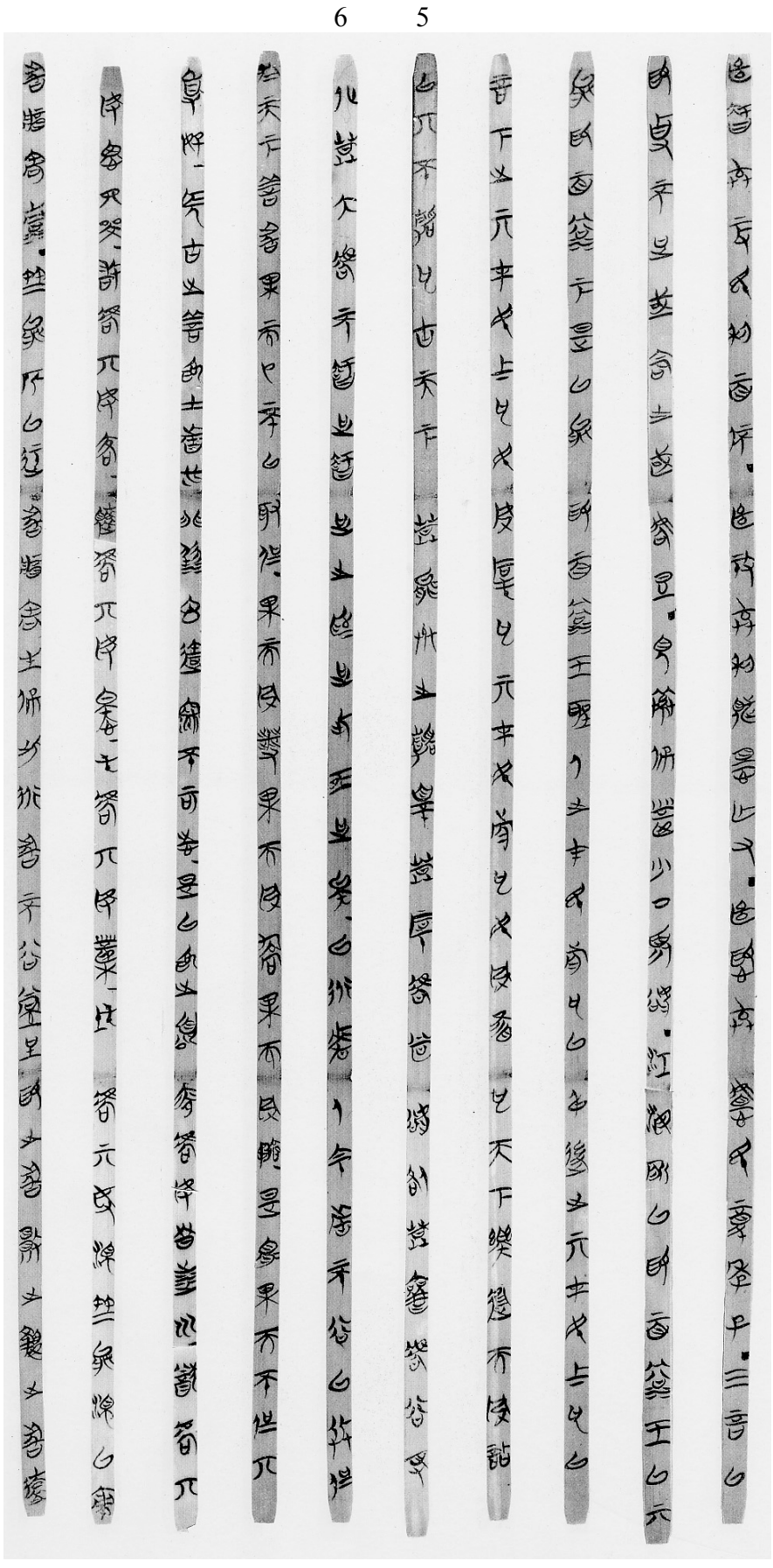


figure 2: *wéi/wèi* {为 and 憩} in *Laozi* A, B, C, *Tai yi sheng shui*, and *Yu cong* 4

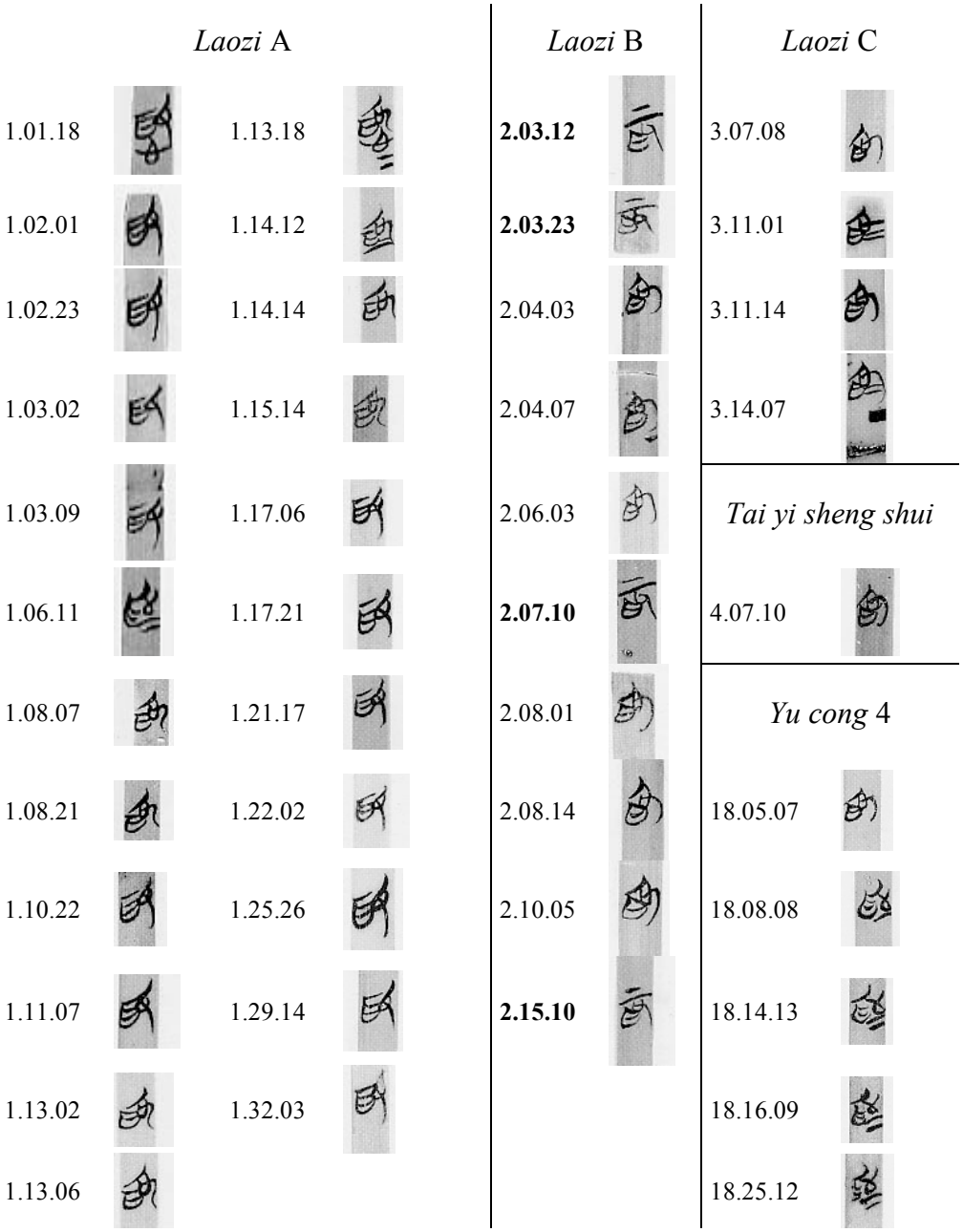


figure 3: *zhě* {者} in *Laozi* A, B, C, *Tai yi sheng shui*, and *Yu cong* 4

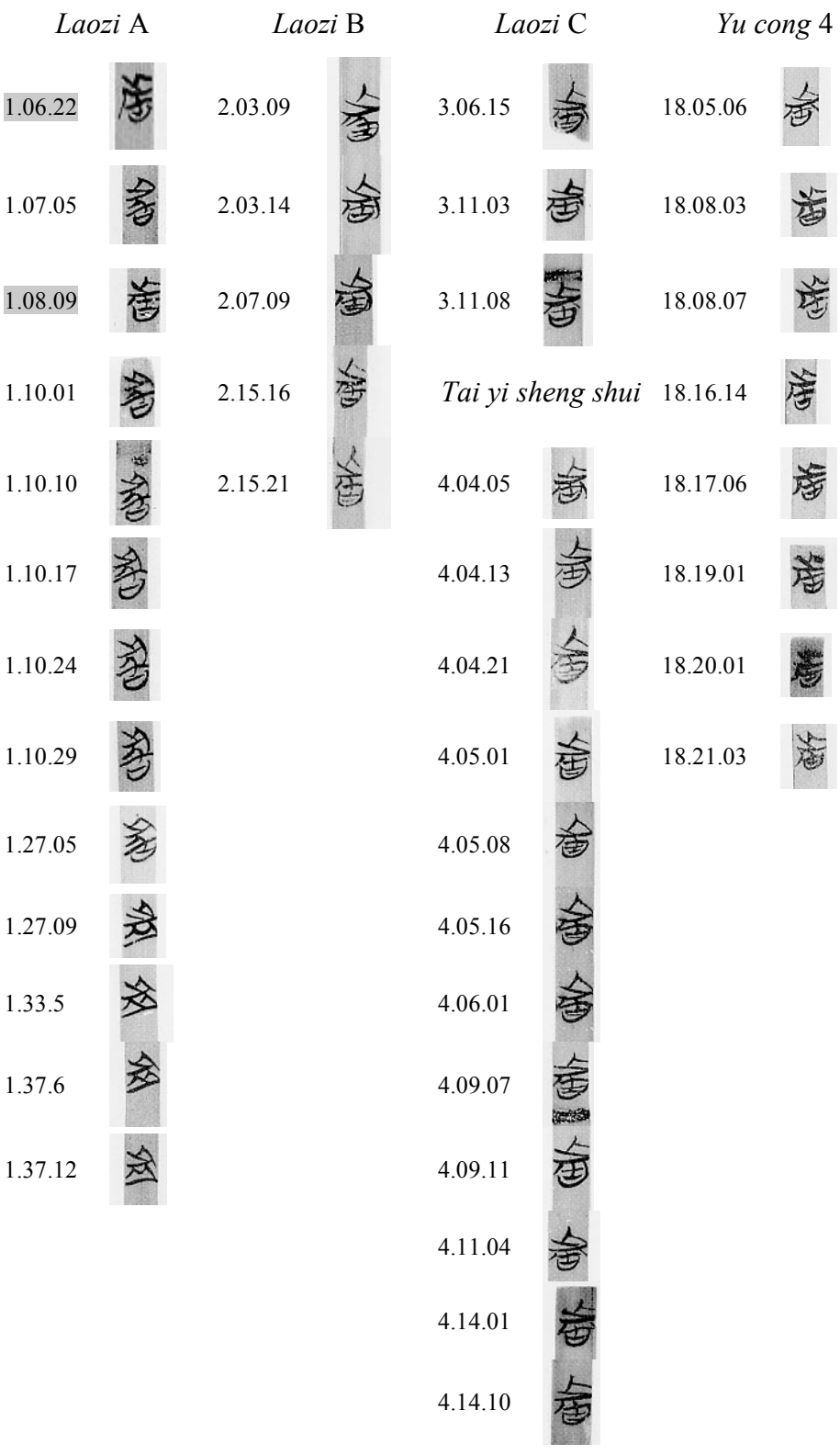


figure 4: upward slant and characteristic angles between strokes of *zhě* {者} in *Laozi* A, B, C, *Tai yi sheng shui*, and *Yu cong* 4

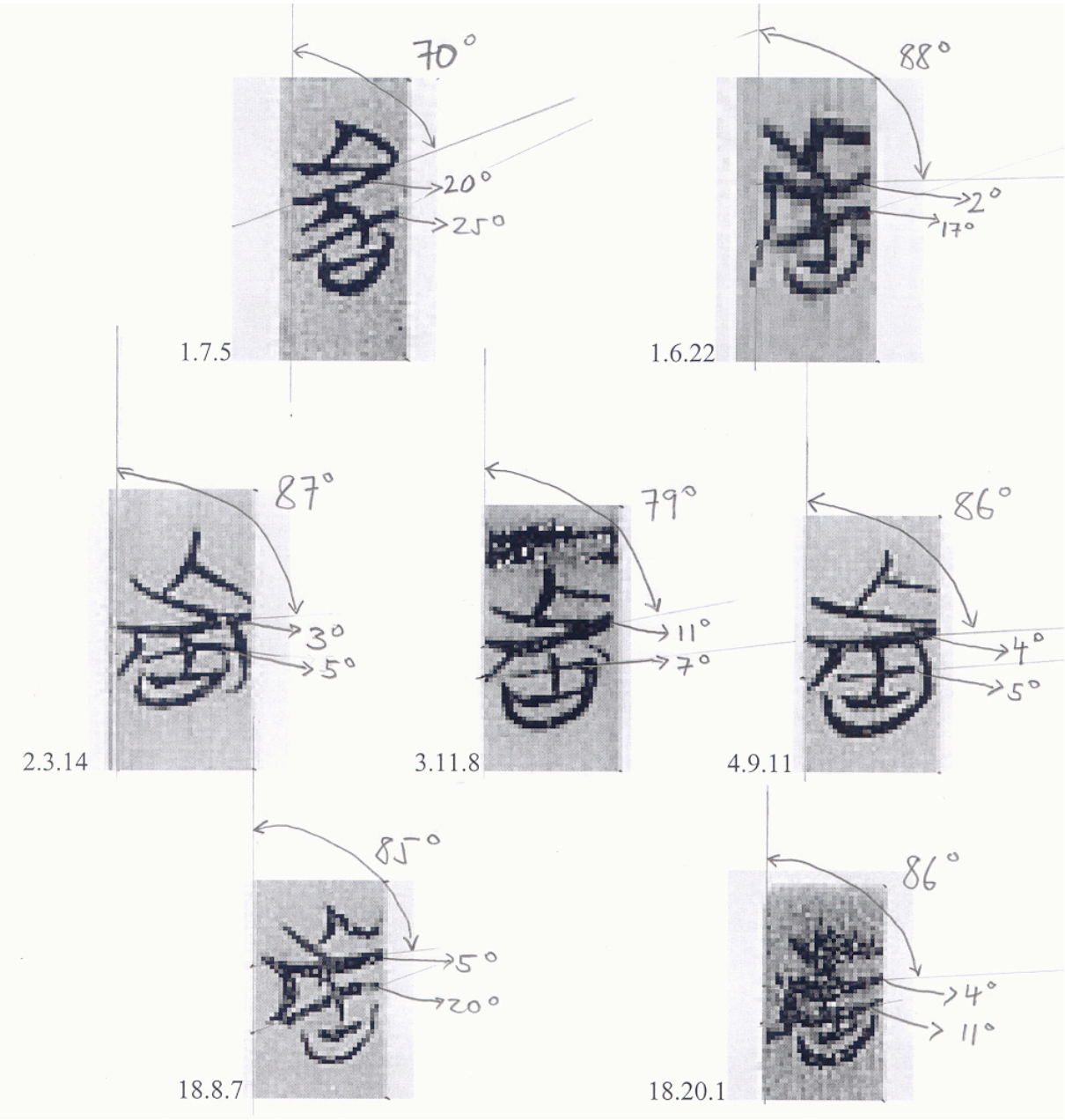


figure 5a: *zhī* {之} in *Laozi* A, B, C, *Tai yi sheng shui*, and *Yu cong* 4

Laozi A

1.2.7 
1.3.15 
1.3.23 
1.4.3 
1.5.12 
1.6.10 
1.8.5 
1.8.22 
1.10.23 
1.10.26 
1.10.28 
1.11.1 
1.11.18 
1.12.7 
1.12.14 
1.12.25 
1.13.12 
1.13.24 
1.13.28 
1.14.23 
1.15.3 
1.15.13 
1.15.29 
1.16.3 
1.16.9 
1.16.15 
1.16.21 
1.16.27 
1.17.7 
1.17.12 
1.19.2 
1.19.19 
1.20.15 
1.20.23 
1.21.26 
1.22.3 
1.23.12 
1.25.27 
1.26A.5 
1.26B.4 
1.27.4
1.27.8
1.31.19
1.33.3
1.34.6
1.34.11

Laozi B

1.34.21
1.37.14
1.37.19
1.38.1
1.38.9
1.39.7
2.2.12
2.3.5
2.3.17
2.6.7
2.6.11
2.9.24
2.10.13
2.16.11
2.16.18
2.17.1
2.17.8
2.17.15

Laozi C

3.1.6
3.1.11
3.1.15
3.1.19
3.5.8
3.5.13
3.7.5
3.7.14
3.9.14
3.10.6
3.10.14
3.11.2
3.11.5
3.11.7
3.11.10
3.12.11
3.12.21
3.13.9
3.14.1

Tai yi sheng shui

4.8.14
4.10.6
4.10.13

Yu cong 4

4.11.17
18.3.2
18.3.10
18.4.6
18.5.3
18.6.1
18.8.11
18.9.1
18.10.3
18.10.10
18.11.5
18.14.11
18.15.1
18.15.10
18.18.3
18.19.4
18.20.5
18.27.13
18.27v.6
18.27v.9
18.27v.11
18.27v.14

figure 5b: upward slant and characteristic angles between strokes of *zhī* {之} in hand A (*Laozi* A) as compared with hand B (slips 5 and 6 of *Laozi* A) and *Laozi* B, C and *Yu cong* 4

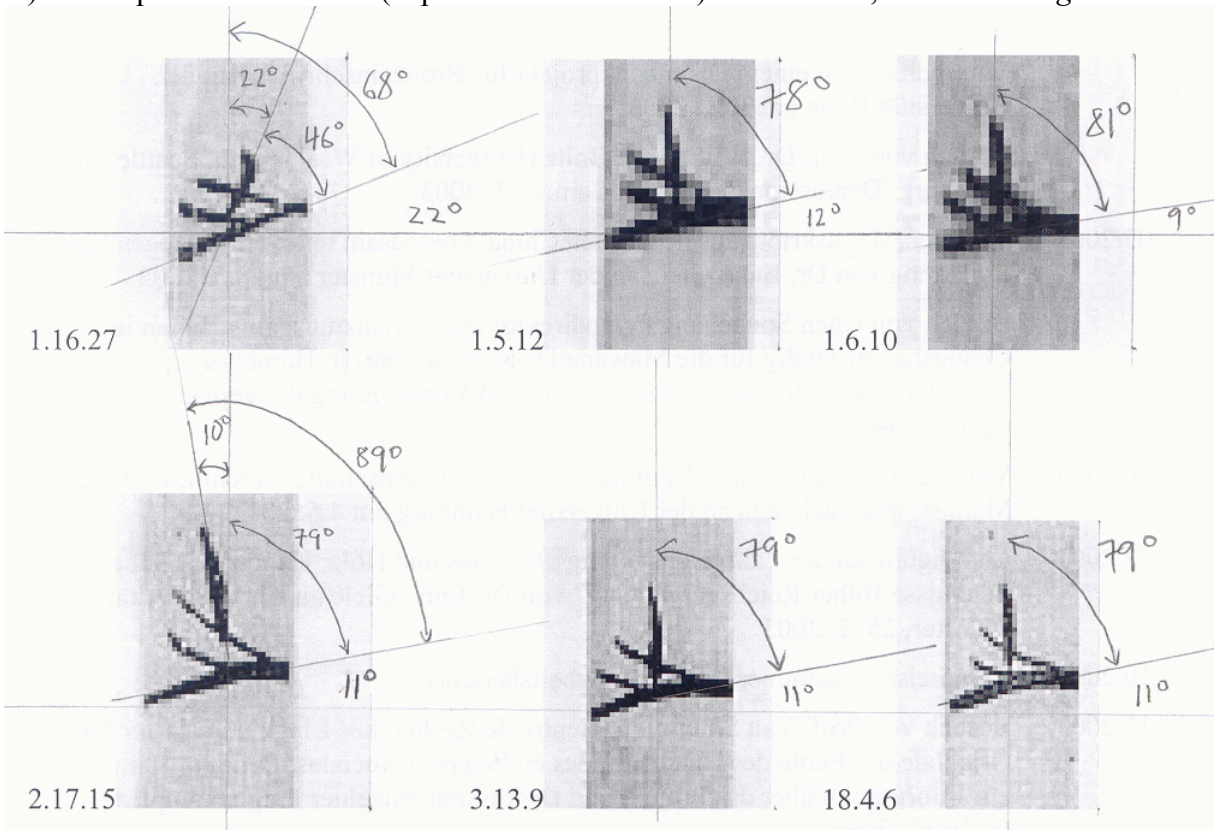
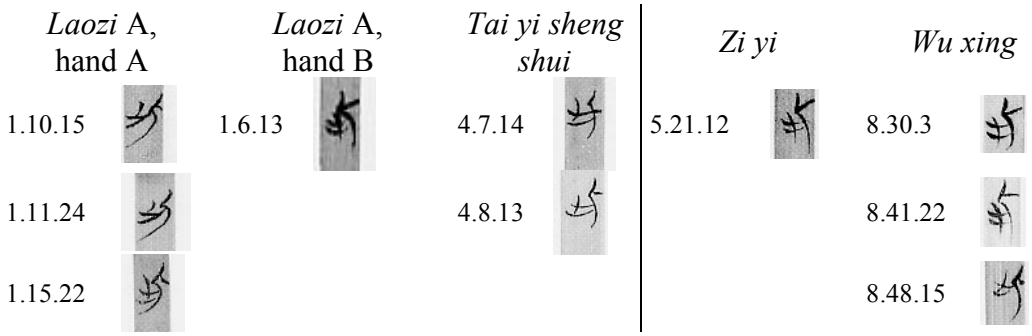


figure 6: *cǐ* {此} in *Laozi* A, B, C, *Tai yi sheng shui*, and *Yu cong* 4



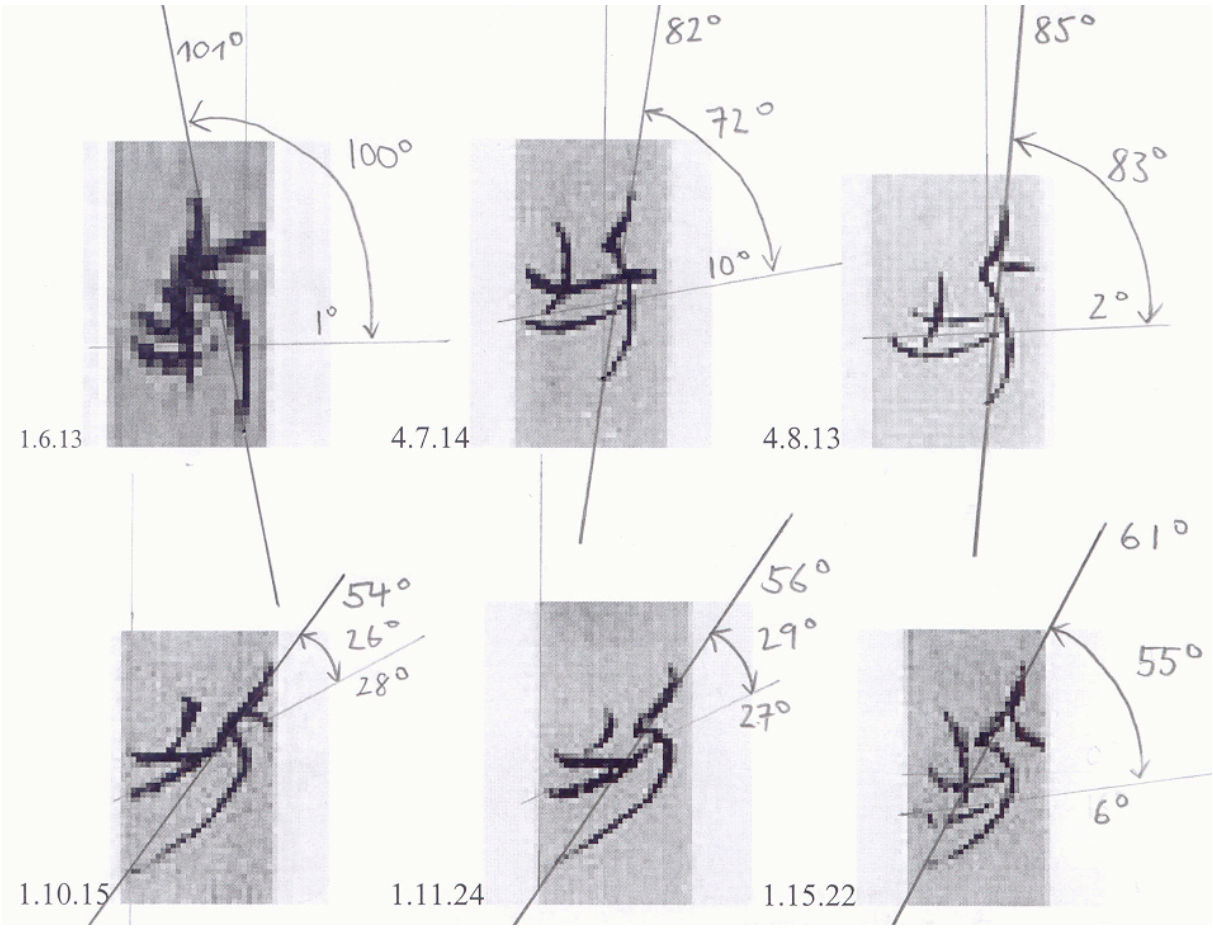


figure 7a: *yǔ* {与/與} in *Laozi* A, B, C, *Tai yi sheng shui*, and *Yu cong* 4

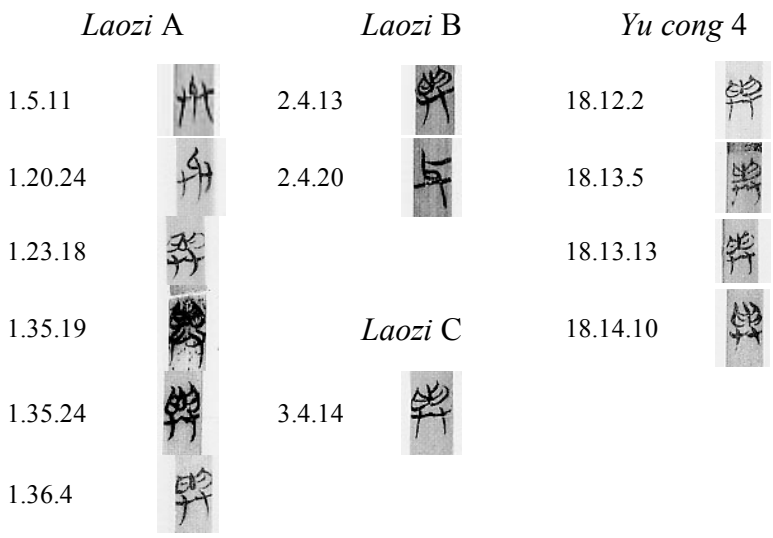


figure 7b: *yǒu* {有} in *Laozi* A, B, C, *Tai yi sheng shui*, and *Yu cong* 4

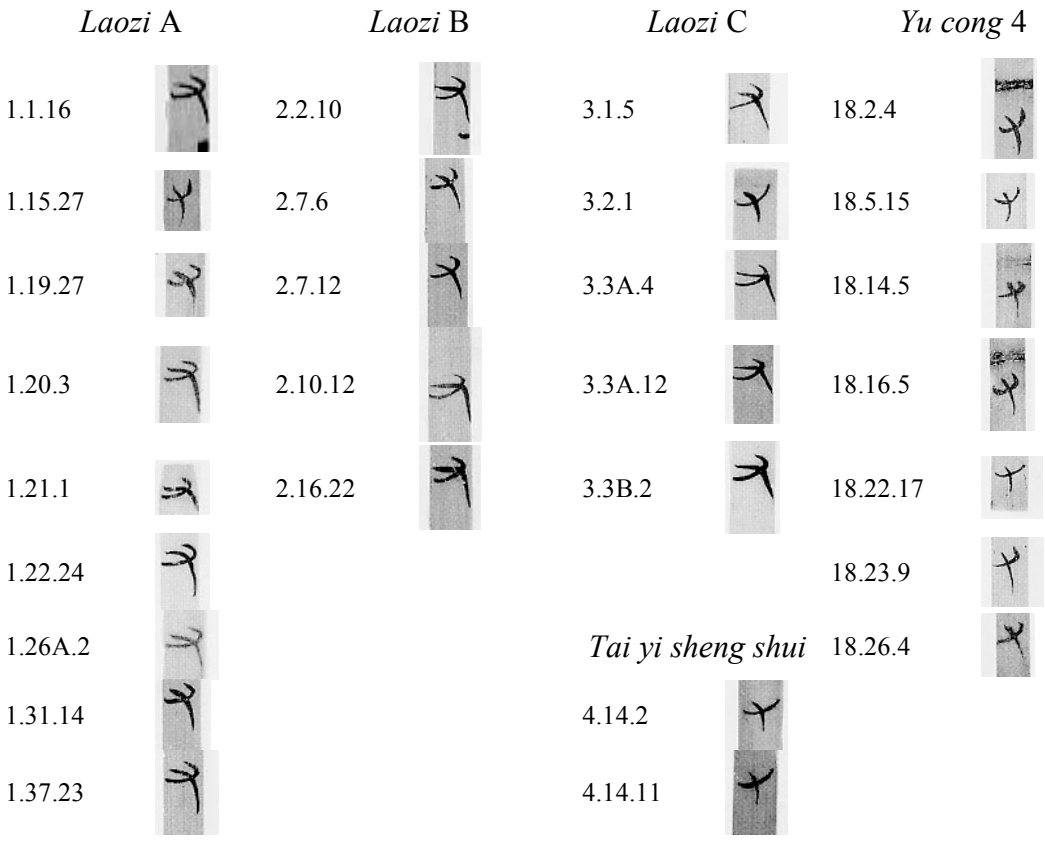


figure 8: *yě* {也} in *Laozi* A, B, C, *Tai yi sheng shui*, and *Yu cong* 4

Laozi A

1.3.19 
1.3.28 
1.4.8 
1.4.12 
1.4.17 
1.4.21 
1.5.5 
1.13.7 
1.15.16 
1.15.32 
1.16.6 
1.16.12 
1.16.18 
1.16.24 
1.16.30 
1.17.20 
1.17.25 
1.18.3 
1.18.8 
1.19.12 
1.20.19 

1.24.4 
1.24.8 
1.24.17 
1.25.3 
1.25.6 
1.25.10 
1.25.13 
1.25.16 
1.25.19 
1.25.22 
1.25.25 
1.26A.3 
1.30.10 
1.34.13 
1.34.23 
1.37.5 
1.37.9 
1.37.11 
1.37.16 
1.38.14 
1.38.22 

Laozi B

2.3.7 
2.4.1 
2.6.5 

Laozi C

3.2.9 
3.2.21 
3.5.6 
3.5.21 
3.7.12 
3.9.15 
3.11.18 
3.12.13 
3.12.19 

Tai yi sheng shui

1.39.1 
1.39.9 

4.2.1 
4.2.10 
4.2.19 
4.3.3 
4.3.12 
4.3.21 
4.4.10 
4.4.18 
4.5.13 
4.5.21 
4.6.6 
4.10.3 
4.10.10 
4.10.19 
4.11.20 

Yu cong 4

18.21.15 
18.27v.3