

# On the Use of Rhymes in Determining the Structure and Interpretation of Old Chinese Texts: The Case of the *DàoDé Jīng* 《道德經》<sup>\*</sup>

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This paper uses the example of passages of the *DàoDé Jīng* 《道德經》 to make the point that when one is working with Old Chinese texts, it is important to pay attention to the rhyming patterns in the texts, as they give clues to the proper segmentation of lines and larger segments and to the proper pronunciation of some characters, and can alert us to where characters have been changed due to taboo or scribal error.

**Keywords:** *DàoDé Jīng*, rhyming texts, pre-Qin philosophy, philological interpretation, prosody in interpretation

## 1. Introduction

Chinese classical texts from the pre-Qin period do not mark phrase, line, or sentence breaks, and so in reading the texts, one has to decide where to pause and how to group characters into phrases and clauses for interpretation. This is not always easy, and so there are controversies about where to make breaks in the texts, and differences in this regard can influence the interpretation of the work. In doing this we can look for lines or phrases that rhyme, as the rhymes will mark the end of lines and in some cases phrases. Of course not all texts involve rhymes, and even some texts that do involve rhymes do not have them in all passages, but we can use them wherever we do find them. We can also sometimes use rhymes to identify the proper pronunciation of characters when there are two or more possible pronunciations, and to identify where characters have been changed due to taboos or scribal error.

But as the language has changed much in the 2500 years or so since the texts were first written, such that words that rhymed in Old Chinese no longer rhyme in Modern Chinese, without an understanding of Old Chinese phonology one might easily overlook the rhyming patterns. There can also be disagreement even among scholars who do have good knowledge of Old Chinese phonology as to what lines or phrases rhyme and which do not rhyme, as in the case for example of Karlgren (1932) and 董同龢 (1938) disagreeing about which lines or phrases rhyme in the *DàoDé Jīng* 《道德經》 (also known as the *Lǎozǐ* 《老子》, the name of the supposed author), a circa fifth century BCE Daoist philosophical text that has been translated dozens of times (into Modern Chinese and non-Chinese languages—more times than any other book except for The Bible), with very different interpretations being manifested in the different translations.

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\* I would like to offer this paper to the memorial volume of the *Bulletin of Chinese Linguistics* on the occasion of Prof. Li Fang-kuei's 120th birthday, to show my respect and affection for him, and gratitude for all I learned from him, both in linguistics and more generally in observing his behavior (為人處世).

The differences are partly due to how the translators parsed the text, and partly due to the particular version of the text the translator used, as there are more than a few different versions, including one received version annotated by the 3rd century CE scholar Wáng Bì (王弼) and later the 6th–7th century scholar Lù Dé míng (陸德明), a second one annotated by the 2nd century BCE scholar Hé Shàng Gōng (河上公), a third annotated by the 6th–7th century scholar Fù Yì (傅奕), and several versions unearthed from ancient tombs. This paper is one part of the results of a long-term study of the *DàoDé Jīng*, comparing the different versions available, studying the commentaries, determining the rhyming patterns, and assessing which parts of which versions best fit the rhyming patterns and also are consistent with the overall philosophy presented in the text. Many other scholars have done similar work, either to interpret the texts or to try to determine the sound system of the dialect manifested in the text, but in this paper I would like to discuss a couple of issues with the received text that can be resolved by looking at the rhyming patterns, to make the point that those working with the texts need to pay attention to the rhymes.

## 2. Framework

Scholars working on Old Chinese phonology often use the rhyming patterns found in the *Shī Jīng* 《詩經》, the earliest collection of song poems in Chinese literature, to determine what characters seem to have been pronounced similarly at the time the poems were written. They classify the rhymes into categories of words that rhyme together, and give the category a name that is a word from the category itself. In my discussion of the passages below, I have given the *Shī Jīng* rhyme categories that scholars working on Old Chinese phonology use, and Prof. Li Fāngguì's (Li Fang-Kuei) interpretations of their phonetic values of them (based on 李方桂 1982), on the right, but they are just for reference, as they are not necessarily the same as those reflected in the *DàoDé Jīng*, which is assumed to have been written in the ancient Chǔ (楚) dialect of south-central China, somewhat different from the northern dialect manifested in the *Shī Jīng*.

There are consistent patterns of rhyming across several texts that are assumed to represent the speech of the Chǔ dialect, aside from the *DàoDé Jīng*, such as *Chǔcí* 《楚辭》 by Qū Yuán (屈原; 340–278 BCE) and the poems (賦) by Sòng Yù (宋玉; 298–222 BCE) (趙彤 2003), and we can use these consistencies to help us determine which characters rhyme and which do not in the *DàoDé Jīng*.

In the *Shī Jīng* there are many “cross-rhymes”, that is, words that are from different rhyme categories but are occasionally used together as a rhyme in particular poems. In the case of the Chǔ dialect documents we find a large number of *Shī Jīng* rhyme categories that cross-rhyme frequently in the Chǔ dialect documents, such as in Table 1, below (Karlgrén 1932; 董同龢 1938; 趙彤 2003).

**Table 1. *Shī Jīng* rhyme categories that cross-rhyme frequently in Chǔ dialect documents**

東：陽 (*-uŋ : *-aŋ)	之：幽 (-ə(g) : *-əw)
耕：真 (*-iŋ : *-in)	侯：魚 (*-u(g) : *a(g)v)
文：元 (*-əŋ : *-aŋ)	真：文 (*-in : *-əŋ)
東：冬 (*-uŋ : *-əwŋ)	脂：微 (*-i(d) : *-ə(d))
物：月 (*-ət : *at)	之：魚 (-ə(g) : *a(g))

Because of these cross-rhyming patterns, 趙彤 (2003) gives the interpretation of the rhymes of the Chǔ dialect presented in Table 2 (in the phonetic transcription of 趙彤, ô represents a slightly higher o):

Table 2. The analysis of the Chǔ dialect rhyme categories (趙彤 2003)

之 Zhī (*-ɿ)	職 Zhí (*-ɿk)	蒸 Zhēng (*-ɿŋ)	微 Wēi (*-ɿi)	物 Wù (*-ɿt)	文 Wén (*-ɿn)
幽 Yōu (*-ô)	覺 Jué (*-ôk)	冬 Dōng (*-ôŋ)		緝 Jī (*-ôp)	侵 Qīn (*-ôm)
宵 Xiāo (*-au)	藥 Yào (*-auk)				
侯 Hóu (*-o)	屋 Wū (*-ok)	東 Dōng (*-oŋ)			
魚 Yú (*-ɔ)	鐸 Duó (*-ɔk)	陽 Yáng (*-ɔŋ)		葉 Yè (*-ɔp)	談 Tán (*-ɔm)
支 Zhī (*-e)	錫 Xī (*-ek)	耕 Gēng (*-eŋ)	脂 Zhī (*-ei)	質 Zhì (*-et)	真 Zhēn (*-en)
歌 Gē (*-ai)				月 Yuè (*-at)	元 Yuán (*-an)

This system makes the cross-rhymes seem more natural, as, for example, the vowels in 東 Dōng (\*-oŋ) and 陽 Yáng (\*-ɔŋ) and also 侯 Hóu (\*-o) and 魚 Yú (\*-ɔ) differ only slightly in height, while those in 之 Zhī (\*-ɿ) and 幽 Yōu (\*-ô) differ only in rounding, yet while the rhyme categories have a solid empirical basis in the rhyming patterns,<sup>1</sup> the interpretations of their phonetic basis are speculative, and a bit teleological, and so they are just for reference.

### 3. Analysis

Now let's turn to the analysis of the text. Here are the first and second stanzas of the *DàoDé Jīng*:

- (1) 道可道，非常道。 (道幽部 \*-əw；道幽部 \*-əw)  
 名可名，非常名。 (名耕部 \*-iŋ；名耕部 \*-iŋ)  
 無，名天地之始； (無魚部 \*-a(g)；始之部 \*-ə(g))  
 有，名萬物之母。 (有之部 \*-ə(g)；母之部 \*-ə(g))  
 故常無，欲以觀其妙； (無魚部 \*-a(g)；妙宵部 \*-aw)  
 常有，欲以觀其徼。 (有之部 \*-ə(g)；徼宵部 \*-aw)  
 此兩者同出而異名， (兩陽部 \*-aŋ；名耕部 \*-iŋ)  
 同謂（之玄。） (玄元部 \*-an)  
 玄之又玄，衆妙之門。 (玄元部 \*-an；門文部 \*-ən)
- (2) 天下皆知美之為美，斯惡已。 (美脂部 \*-i(d)；惡鐸部 \*-ak)  
 皆知善之為善，斯不善已。 (善元部 \*-an；善元部 \*-an)  
 故有無相生，難易相成， (生耕部 \*-iŋ；成耕部 \*-iŋ)  
 長短相形，高下相傾， (形耕部 \*-iŋ；傾耕部 \*-iŋ)  
 音聲相和，前後相隨。 (和歌部 \*-ar；隨歌部 \*-ar)  
 是以聖人處無為之事，行不言之教； (事之部 \*-ə(g)；教宵部 \*-aw)  
 萬物作焉而不為始，生而不有。 (始之部 \*-ə(g)；有之部 \*-ə(g))  
 為而不恃，功成而弗居。 (恃之部 \*-ə(g)；居魚部 \*-a(g))  
 夫唯弗居，是以不去。 (居魚部 \*-a(g)；去魚部 \*-a(g))

<sup>1</sup> That is, what words rhyme together can be determined from the patterns found. Even though, for example, while in the Chǔ literature words identified as being in the *Shī Jīng* 東 Dōng and 陽 Yáng rhyme categories often rhyme with each other, they rhyme more often within their own categories in the Chǔ literature, and so are still seen to be separate categories (趙彤 2003).

If we look at these two stanzas together, we can see that the rhyming pattern is quite regular, with the first part of the line rhyming with the second part, and that the rhyming pattern is roughly the same in the two stanzas, even to the extent that the first two lines of each do not rhyme (unless we consider repetition as rhyming).

Looking more closely at Stanza 1, we can resolve an issue in the interpretation of the text using the rhymes. Traditionally there have been two readings that have been accepted by different people for lines 3–4 in the first stanza, one being the one given in the text above, “無，名天地之始；有，名萬物之母”，the other being “無名，天地之始；有名，萬物之母”。The first version fits the overall pattern of the two stanzas by rhyming the first part of each line with the second, as *wú* “無” rhymes with *shǐ* “始”，and *yǒu* “有” rhymes with *mǔ* “母”，while the second version does not. In terms of the interpretation of the reading and meaning of the text, this is an argument for understanding the topics of the two lines as *wú* “無” and *yǒu* “有”，respectively, rather than *wú míng* “無名” and *yǒu míng* “有名”。This is more in accord with the overall philosophy and the way of talking about it in the text as a whole. See for example Stanza 40: “天下之物生於有，有生於無”，and Stanza 43: “出於無有，入於無間”，which both talk about emergence from *wú* “無” and then *yǒu* “有”，and also Stanza 52: “天下有始，以為天下母”，which has the same rhyme pattern as the line in question.

If we then look at lines 5–6 in Stanza 1, there is another issue we can resolve in the same way. The issue is again where to put the pause, with the two choices being “故常無，欲以觀其妙；常有，欲以觀其微” and “故常無欲，以觀其妙；常有欲，以觀其微”。Again, the rhymes point to the former, with the topics being *chángwú* “常無” and *chángyǒu* “常有”，respectively, which then again fits better with the philosophy and overall discussion as mentioned in the paragraph above, taking *wú* “無” and *yǒu* 有 as the topics, rather than talking about *wúyù* “無欲” and *yǒuyù* “有欲”。The *DàoDé Jīng* frequently advocates *wúyù* “無欲” ‘not have desire’, but the expression *yǒuyù* “有欲” ‘have desire’ does not show up anywhere else in the text, and the concept “常有欲” doesn’t make sense in the context of the text and is not in accord with the usual use of “常” in this text. In lines 5–6 *yù* “欲” is not ‘desire’, but is acting as a sort of prospective aspect marker, similar to “將”。See also Zhuangzi’s comment in 《天下》：“關尹、老聃聞其風而悅之。建之以常無、有，主之以太一，以濡弱謙下為表，以空虛不毀萬物為實。” In this quote “常無” and “常有” are said to be the core of Laozi’s philosophy.

The rhymes can also help us know which of two or more possible pronunciations for a given character might be the right one in the context. For example, in stanza 6, given below, the first and second parts of each line rhyme clearly for the second and third lines, but if we pronounce the last character of line one, “牝”, as *pìn*, the usual pronunciation for this character, which is in the Zhēn rhyme category (真部), the first and second parts of the line do not rhyme. Yet there is another pronunciation for this character, with the same meaning. Lù Démíng (陸德明), in his *Explanation of the Classics* 《經典釋文》 says there is an older pronunciation: “牝頻忍反舊音扶死反”, which is in the Zhī rhyme category (脂部), and so rhymes with “死” in the first part of line one. The *Ji Yùn* 《集韻》, an early 11th century CE rhyme book, gives the pronunciation “並履切” (卷五 33), which matches the older pronunciation given by Lù Démíng. The *Explanation of Graphs and Interpretation of Characters* 《說文解字》, an early 2nd century CE dictionary, says that “匕” is the phonetic element in the character, and as “匕” is in the Zhī rhyme category (卑履切) that makes more sense if the pronunciation of “牝” is also in the Zhī rhyme category.

- |                |                                  |
|----------------|----------------------------------|
| (6) 谷神不死，是謂玄牝。 | (死脂部 *-i(d)；牝真部 *-in/ 脂部 *-i(d)) |
| 玄牝之門，是謂天地根。    | (門文部 *-ən；根文部 *-ən)              |
| 綿綿若存，用之不勤。     | (存文部 *-ən；勤文部 *-ən)              |

An example of how the rhymes can help us identify where characters have been changed in the text is in Stanza 54. The first six lines have a clear rhyming pattern where the first and second parts of each line (and even the third part in line 1) rhyme with each other:

- (54) 善建者不拔，善抱者不脫，子孫以祭祀不輟。(拔月部 \*-at；脫月部 \*-at；輟月部 \*-at)  
 修之於身，其德乃真；(身真部 \*-in；真真部 \*-in)  
 修之於家，其德乃餘；(家魚部 \*-a(g)；餘魚部 \*-a(g))  
 修之於鄉，其德乃長；(鄉陽部 \*-aŋ；長陽部 \*-aŋ)  
 修之於邦，其德乃豐；(邦陽部 \*-aŋ；豐陽部 \*-aŋ)  
 修之於天下，其德乃普。(下魚部 \*-a(g)；普魚部 \*-a(g))

The received text, though, has *guó* “國” instead of *bāng* “邦” in the first part of line 5, but this disturbs the very clear rhyming pattern (as *guó* “國” is in the Zhí rhyme category—職部 \*-ək). It is clear that the word was changed, possibly due to a prohibition of using the emperor’s name, Liú Bāng (劉邦), during the Han Dynasty.

Another example is in Stanza 10, below, where the second to last character in each line of the first six lines rhyme together. In the received text, given below, line 6 is “明白四達，能無為乎？”，with *wéi* 為 (Gē rhyme category—歌部) as the rhyme, disturbing the Zhī rhyme category (支部) rhyming pattern that dominates the stanza.

- (10) 營魄抱一，能無離乎？(一質部 \*-it；離歌部 \*-ar)  
 專氣致柔，能嬰兒乎？(柔幽部 \*-əw；兒支部 \*-i(k))  
 滌除玄鑿，能無疵乎？(鑿談部 \*-am；疵支部 \*-i(k))  
 愛民治國，能無知乎？(國職部 \*-ək；知支部 \*-i(k))  
 天門開闔，能為雌乎？(闔葉部 \*-ap；雌支部 \*-i(k))  
 明白四達，能無為乎？(達月部 \*-at；為歌部 \*-ar)  
 生之、(生耕部 \*-iŋ)  
 畜之、(畜覺部 \*-əwk；  
 生而弗有，為而不恃，長而不宰，(有之部 \*-ə(g)；恃之部 \*-ə(g)；宰之部 \*-ə(g))  
 是謂玄德。(德職部 \*-ək)

Although we find a few examples of Gē rhyme category words rhyming with Zhī category words in some of the other Chǔ texts (趙彤 2003:112: “[楚辭/九歌/少司命] 離知 [楚辭/大招] 佳規施卑移 [莊子/在宥] 知離知離”), they are almost all of the character 離, so it seems there is something special about that word, and it is accepted by most scholars (e.g., Karlgren 1932; 董同龢 1938) that in this stanza “離” rhymes with “兒”.<sup>2</sup> We can’t say the same for “為”; Karlgren (1932:3) assumes “為” rhymes with the Zhī

2 In Stanza 28, we also find “離” rhyming with “兒” in line 2. This is clear from the pattern of rhymes overall, with the second and third parts of lines 1, 3, and 6 rhyming, and all three parts of lines 2, 4, 5 rhyming:

知其雄，守其雌，為天下谿。(雌支部 \*-i(k)；溪支部 \*-i(k))  
 為天下谿，常德不離，復歸於嬰兒。(谿支部 \*-i(k)；離歌部 \*-ar；兒支部 \*-i(k))  
 知其白，守其黑，為天下式。(黑職部 \*-ək；式職部 \*-ək)

category words, but as mentioned above, this cross-rhyme is not attested elsewhere in Chǔ materials, and 董同龢 (1938:9–10) seems to not accept this view.

One possibility for resolving this is found in the Mǎ Wáng Duī silk version B (馬王堆 B) and the Fù Yì version (傅奕本), where a slightly different version of that line, with the second part of the line being “能毋 / 無以知乎”. Here there are two significant differences compared to the received text: the addition of “以” and the replacement of “為” by “知”. The addition of “以” throws off the parallelism of the lines, so is probably not original, but having “知” instead of “為” (“明白四達，能無知乎？”) seems more correct based on the rhymes. The expression “無知” seems also to fit the pattern of meaning of the stanza better as well, to “明白” and yet “無知”, which is the goal of Daoism (see for example, Stanza 71: “知不知，尚矣”).

Another example is in Stanza 16:

- |               |                                   |
|---------------|-----------------------------------|
| (16) 致虛極，守靜篤。 | (極職部 *-ək; 篤職部 *-ək)              |
| 萬物並作，吾以觀其復。   | (作鐸部 *-ak; 復職部 *-ək) <sup>3</sup> |
| 夫物芸芸，各復歸其根。   | (芸文部 *-ən; 根文部 *-ən)              |
| 歸根曰靜，是謂復命。    | (靜耕部 *-iŋ; 命耕部 *-iŋ)              |
| 復命曰常，知常曰明。    | (常陽部 *-aŋ; 明陽部 *-aŋ)              |
| 不知常，妄作凶；      | (常陽部 *-aŋ; 凶東部 *-uŋ)              |
| 知常容，容乃公，      | (容東部 *-uŋ; 公東部 *-uŋ)              |
| 公乃全，全乃天，      | (全元部 *-an; 天真部 *-in)              |
| 天乃道，道乃久，沒身不殆。 | (道幽部 *-aw; 久之部 *-ə; 殆之部 *-ə)      |

Here we have a very consistent rhyme pattern, though with some common cross-rhyme patterns. The issue with this stanza is that the received version has wáng “王” instead of quán “全” in line 8, but that would disturb the rhyming pattern (wáng “王” is a Yáng category (陽部) word, while tiān “天” is a Zhēn category (真部) word; these two categories do not usually cross-rhyme). The suspicion is that there was a scribal error, miswriting “全” as “王”. The meaning of “全” also seems to fit better with Wáng Bì’s explanation of this sentence as “蕩然公平，則乃至於無所不周普也”。

A last example is from Stanza 20, line 4. Here are lines 3 and 4:

- |                 |                      |
|-----------------|----------------------|
| (20) 唯之與阿，相去幾何？ | (阿歌部 *-ar; 何歌部 *-ar) |
| 美之與惡，相去何若？      | (惡鐸部 *-ak; 若鐸部 *-ak) |

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為天下式，常德不忒，復歸於無極。	(式職部 *-ək; 忒職部 *-ək; 極職部 *-ək)
知其榮，守其辱，為天下谷；	(辱屋部 *-uk; 谷屋部 *-uk)
為天下谷，常德乃足，復歸於樸。	(谷屋部 *-uk; 足屋部 *-uk; 樸屋部 *-uk)
樸散則為器，聖人用之則為官長。	(器微部 *-ə(d); 長陽部 *-aŋ)
故大制無割。	(割月部 *-at)

The odd-even lines also rhyme with each other (1 with 2; 3 with 4; 5 with 6) as well. One other reason why it is important to pay attention to the rhymes is to recognize the beauty of the parallelism and structure of the rhyme patterns in this piece of literature and appreciate it as such.

3 董同龢 (1938:3) argues that Karlgren is wrong to assume that “作” rhymes with “極”, but given that the first and second parts of each of the other lines rhyme, it would be odd if this line did not follow the pattern.

In line 4 the received text has 若何 instead of 何若, though most of the other texts available have the latter. We can see that the latter is correct because 若 rhymes with 惡, whereas 何 does not.

One more aspect related to the nature of rhyming texts is that it is good to keep in mind when analyzing a text that one shouldn't put too much weight on the use of a particular word that appears in the rhyme of a stanza, as that word might have been used for the sake of the rhyme as much as for the meaning.

These are just a few examples from one text that is only partially rhymed, but I think the principle can be established that one needs to consider the rhymes in working with texts where there is a possibility of a rhyming pattern.

#### 4. A parallel example

When drafts of this paper were shown to non-linguist specialists in Chinese philosophy, a response I got back was that they could not imagine how the words could rhyme in the way I am saying they do, given how much they seem to differ in Modern Mandarin. Because of this, I would like to include a parallel example from a modern Sinitic variety, the Southern Min variety spoken in Taiwan, to give an example of how words that don't rhyme in Mandarin can rhyme in another Sinitic variety and how rhyming is not always exact. The following is the lyrics of a modern Southern Min pop song with the pronunciations given after the rhyming words (you can listen to the song here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NsEHmuGseJ0>).

若是有一工 (kaŋ<sup>1</sup>) 我忘記哩我的名 (mia<sup>5</sup>)  
 麻煩你著詳細講乎我聽 (tiã<sup>1</sup>)  
 講咱的故事 (su<sup>7</sup>) 一生的風雨 (u<sup>2</sup>)  
 反勢我會想起咱的所有 (u<sup>7</sup>)

若是有一工 (kaŋ<sup>1</sup>) 你袂認得我的人 (laŋ<sup>5</sup>)  
 請你毋通拒絕我的攬 (lam<sup>2</sup>)  
 我的胸坎 (kham<sup>2</sup>) 有燒燒的溫暖 (luan<sup>2</sup>)  
 曾經陪你寒冬每一晚 (buan<sup>2</sup>)

歲月染成白頭髮 (tsaŋ<sup>1</sup>) 牽手行甲袂震動 (taŋ<sup>7</sup>)  
 是咱雙人一生的願望 (baŋ<sup>7</sup>)  
 總有一工 (kaŋ<sup>1</sup>) 身邊會減一人 (laŋ<sup>5</sup>)  
 毋通忘記哩咱 (lan<sup>2</sup>) 來生再來牽 (khan<sup>1</sup>)

In the first two stanzas you have the same rhyme pattern of 3 and 3, and so you can see the rhymes are not always exact, and also how different the pronunciations are from Mandarin, where, for example 事 and 兩 aren't even close in pronunciation in Mandarin, while the last stanza changes the last line to a different rhyme (assuming it isn't meant to rhyme with -aŋ, which it might be), possibly because it is the last line of the song.

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# 試探以韻腳來確定先秦文獻的結構和解釋： 以《道德經》為例

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本文以《道德經》的段落為例，指出在分出先秦文獻的短語、句、行、段、章時，以及理解文獻的哲理，韻腳的分析可以提供重要的線索，並且可以幫我們看出哪裏由於禁忌或抄寫錯誤而導致了字的更改。

**關鍵詞：**《道德經》、韻文、先秦哲學、訓詁學、韻律在訓詁的作用

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