

# “Patterning Meaning”: A Thick Description of the Tsinghua Manuscript “\*Tāng zài Chì/Dì mén” (Tāng was at the Chì/Dì Gate) and What It Tells Us about Thought Production in Early China \* \*\*

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This paper provides a ‘thick description’ (using Clifford Geertz’s notion) of “\*Tāng zài Chì/Dì mén”, which is part of the Tsinghua Manuscripts. Exploring its communicative dimensions and analysing the interplay between text and performance, this paper reconstructs the social use of “\*Tāng zài Chì/Dì mén” in the discourse of the time. The manuscript text records an imagined dialogue held at the Chì/Dì Gate between King Chéng Tāng and his famous official, Yī Yīn, consistently introduced as ‘minor minister’. The text is highly patterned and presents a conversation about the ‘innately good doctrines of old and their actuality in the present’. The conversation is framed by an introductory formula commonly seen in textualised “Shū” traditions, as well as a final appraisal, which concludes the text in ‘dramatic’ terms (using Helmut Utzschneider’s notion). The text is rhymed while the items under discussion are presented as catalogues, suggesting completeness. The well-balanced composition is at odds with the seemingly meagre content of the text, staging oddly empty phrases that leave the modern reader rather puzzled. By drawing on content-form and communication theories, and considering its performative dimensions, this paper probes the apparent conflict between the content and the form and reconstructs the strategies of Warring States communities to develop meaning through patterned text. Once contextualised, this rather peculiar text serves as a reference for meaning-construction of performance texts in the intellectual landscape of the Warring States period (ca. 453–222 BC) more globally.

**Keywords:** Shangshu, manuscript cultures, orality and literacy, content-form theory, philosophy

\* I want to thank Andrew Meyer, Brooklyn College, CUNY, as well as the anonymous reviewers, for their insightful comments and suggestions, which greatly helped to improve this paper.  
\*\* 編按：應作者要求，本文採用英式標點，並據歐洲漢學傳統標出拼音音調，故與其他篇章統一為美式標點不同，特此說明。又，文末中文摘要由陳子如翻譯。

## 1. The text and manuscript

“\*Tāng zài Chì/Dì mén” 湯在囍門 (Tāng was at the Chì/Dì Gate) is a relatively short text in eight distinct building blocks of seven units of thought that can be organised in two parts: the philosophical core and its applications. It is recorded on 21 slips, ca. 44.5 cm long, collected in the Tsinghua (Qīnghuá) collection of Manuscripts.<sup>1</sup> Three cords connected the slips at their top and bottom ends, as well as their centre. Some slips show two parallel marks at their tail. As marks on the back of the slips suggest, the first 20 were all taken from the same bamboo tube; only slip 21 is from a different tube.<sup>2</sup> Their order as used here follows the editors of the Tsinghua Manuscripts, who based it on the order of events in the text. The slips themselves carry no sequence numbers on their back.

The head of two slips, 11 and 20, has broken off; and the tail of slip 7 is missing. It seems, however, that no graphs are missing. A number of the graphs are blurred (such as *xiàng* 相 or *dì* 地 on slip 40:  ).

Each slip carries on average 28 graphs. The calligraphy is for the most part uniform, with just a few exceptions. According to Lǐ Shǒukuí, the manuscript occasionally shows Chǔ characteristics, while much of the calligraphy displays obvious characteristics of the Three Jin.<sup>3</sup> The manuscript shows cases of secondary corrections where the copyist added further graphs between existing writing, which suggests a concern for text integrity. Examples include the graphs *hǎo* 好 on slip 6; *nǎi* 乃 on slip 7; *wéi* 唯 on slip 20. (See the image on the left, read from the right, with slip 6, to the left, with slip 20). The manuscript carries no title; the



- 1 The photographs of the slips are published in Lǐ Xuéqín 李學勤, ed., *Qīnghuá Dàxué cáng Zhànguó zhújiǎn* 清華大學藏戰國竹簡, vol. 5 (Shànghǎi: Zhōngxī shūjú, 2011), 14–17; 71–84; with an annotated transcription, 141–148.
- 2 Lǐ Shǒukuí 李守奎, “‘Tāng zài Chì/Dì mén’ *dǎodù*” 湯在囍門導讀 (paper presented at “Human Nature, Morality, and Fate in the Tsinghua University Bamboo Manuscripts, *Tāng chu yu Tang qiu* 湯處於湯丘, *Tāng zài Chì mén* 湯在囍門, and *Yin Gaozong wen yu san shou* 殷高宗問于三壽”, the International Consortium for Research in the Humanities at the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, Erlangen, May 12, 2016).
- 3 Ibid.

current working title was assigned by the editors of the Tsinghua Manuscripts.

The manuscript shows punctuation, or ‘breath’, marks. They are used consistently at exclamations or questions, and repeatedly when core definitions are given.

The careful production of the manuscript is in notable tension with the content of the text on the purely lexical level of signification, which is occasionally rather wanting. The secondary corrections and the indication of breath marks suggest that the manuscript was not just produced for display purposes, but for use, that is, to be read out aloud.<sup>4</sup> Some features in the text suggest that it was well suited for that purpose: much of it is rhymed, and its sentences are often carefully balanced, keeping strict parallel schemes and giving a certain, smooth, rhythm. With that much care given to its formal presentation, its meagre content on the lexical level stands out. On the surface level the text contains many hackneyed statements and predictable rhetorical questions, and it features many numbers devoid of lexical explanations that are strangely disconnected from previous trains of thought, leaving the modern reader rather bewildered.

## 2. Patterning Meaning

How should we read “\*Tāng zài Chì/Dì mén”, this rather odd text that was produced circa two thousand five hundred years ago for a meaning community that, we must assume, had precious little in common with its twenty-first century-readers? How can we generate meaning from a piece that so obviously does not speak to us, as too many of its phrases seem so strangely clichéd and empty of meaning? Who were the groups that would make sense of the text, and how did they use it? Did it make sense at all? If it did, what are its strategies by which meaning is generated, and how should we, today, unlock them?

### *Laying out a reading strategy*

The odd features of “\*Tāng zài Chì/Dì mén” make it very clear that approaching the text in the traditional way of trawling it for content, for instance by singling out key terms and discussing them in the context of

- 4 For a discussion of representation texts in China, see Matthias L. Richter, “Textual Identity and the Role of Literacy in the Transmission of Early Chinese Literature”, in *Writing and Literacy in Early China: Studies from the Columbia Early China Seminar*, eds. Li Feng and David Prager Branner (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2011), 206–36.