Recently excavated manuscripts are radically changing the ways in which we come to read the received classics of the Chinese tradition. Bamboo-strip manuscripts from the Warring States period constitute first-hand witnesses to texts as they were written near the time of their conception, with orthographic conventions vastly different from the highly standardized conventions of later periods. Such manuscripts thus give us vital new information about the changes texts must have soon undergone in the process of transmission, as scholars of the early Han went about the task of collating and editing pre-dynastic texts in accordance with the written conventions of their own time. This, in turn, allows us to better understand the nature of errors that were potentially introduced during this transition due to both graphic and phonetic confusion, and thus opens up new possibilities for rereading lines of the received classics themselves.

This paper focuses on the Shanghai-Museum manuscript known as “Jing Gong nue” 竟公瘧, proposing not only a new reading for its crucial opening lines, but also for a number of different passages from transmitted texts on its basis. By using the evidence of these lines to closely examine a variety of indications of ongoing graphic confusion among a set of closely related characters, it will attempt to demonstrate how important passages from such texts as the Book of Documents and the Zuo commentary may have come to be misread over the past two millennia, and thereby reveal entirely new avenues for understanding these classics.