A NOTE TO HÀNSHU 65:

BIOGRAPHY OF DỌNGFĀNG SHUÒ

For linguistic purposes, we study principally the normal speech. But sometimes, eccentricities of speech may throw some sidelight on the normal condition of language, just as pathological findings may help us to understand better the structure and functioning of the human body. The present article is an attempt to show how the study of riddles sometimes found in ancient texts can contribute to the verification of the reconstructions of old Chinese. Some years ago, while reading hànshù chapter 65: Biography of Dōngfāng Shuò, I came across an interesting dialogue between the courtier Guo Sheren and the famous humourist Dongfang Shuo (hereafter G and D respectively). I would like to present my speculations for the consideration of fellow Sino-Tibetanists.

In the dialogue there are several rhyming pieces, of which the rhyming words are respectively 百草/臂数/鼻毛誓高/黄穡啄 鼻蹙/蝉/命/正/敬/敬/敬/事. This article discusses the last two pieces in which you will find some riddles set by G and the answers made by D. The whole passage (in the Bāinà edition 百衲本) reads (plates 1, 2 and 3):

G wouldn't give in, so he said: "I would like to put forward some riddles. If D fails to solve them, he must be flogged too." Then, G said at random some rhyming sequences of words:
