

Chinese writing: ancient autochthonous perspective

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In order to compare what could also be compared between ancient writing systems and enrich our problematics, I would like to provide another possible perspective. Instead of signs structure or origins of writing, I would like to discuss some more theoretic or analytic points such as, for example, the kinds of reflections made by the ancient people on their own writing system. Indeed, It could be worth comparing how and when ancient scribes/scholars started asking questions about their writing system : How they conceived the origins of their writing system, what kind of reflections and theories they elaborated on their script, how they classified and analysed the written signs, what kind of lexical lists they provided, when did they start using a special terminology, etc. This could help us understand constraints imposed by the so called logographic writing system as opposed to phonetic writing systems, and the ways ancient scribes/lexicographers used to handle them.

1. The origins of writing in ancient China

The oldest mention to the origins of writing in China goes back to the 3rd century BC. The great philosopher Xu2nzi3 荀子 (335-238) and his disciple Ha2n Fe1i 韓非 (280-233) present Ca1ng Jie2 倉頡 as someone specialised in writing and eventually as the inventor of writing. The Heroic invention of writing progressively developed, and around the 1st century AD, Ca1ng Jie2 had become the scribe of the Mythical “Yellow Emperor” Hua2ngdi4 who drew his inspiration to invent writing from the marks left by the birds and the beasts on the soil.

Other legendary persons were also mentioned in some texts as inventors of writing (together with Ca1ng Jie)2. But in the first “Chinese dictionary” the *Shuo1 we2n jie3 zi4* 說文解字, compiled in 100 AD, it is only Ca1ng Jie2’s name that was retained.

When considering the late questioning on the origins of writing in China, two points are important: 1° I think a personal practice of scribal act was certainly needed in order to understand the importance of writing. 2° There would certainly be no reflections on writing without the necessity of considering the role and place of writing in society and government.

Therefore it is probably not by pure chance that the legend of Ca1ng Jie2 the inventor of writing first appeared in the 3rd century BC among thinkers promoting a State theory based on the Prince’ sovereignty and laws (in the so-called legalist milieu *fa3jia1* 法家). Xu2nzi3 and especially his disciples Ha2n Fe1i and Li3 Si1, who belonged to that milieu, could certainly understand better than anyone, the importance of writing. Ha2n Fe1i was a stutterer, he was not good at discourse but was a very good writer who tried to convince his king to listen to his political advices, and Li3 Si1 was the prime Minister of Qi2n Shi3 hua2ngdi4, the First Unifier of China in 221 BC who tried to impose the unification of writing to control the recently conquered territories.

The idea that writing allows the functioning of the government was then developed 200 years later by Xu3 She4n the author of the (already mentioned): “*Shuo1 we2n jie3 zi4*”, compiled in 100 AD.

2. The evolution of Chinese writing (*Shuowen xu*),

In 100 AD, Xu3 She4n 許慎¹ wrote the first dictionary of graphic etymology which became the ancestor of all Chinese dictionaries. The title of this dictionary is of capital importance. First of all because it was Xu Shen’s own title (most of ancient Chinese books had no titles), but also because XS insisted on a new distinction between the terms *wén* “*graph*” and *zì* “*written word*” for which there is no evidence before his time. He ended up with a very analytical title “*Shuo1 we2n jie3 zi4* 說文解字 meaning “*Explain the graphs and interpret the written words*”. At the end of his dictionary, Xu3 She4n wrote a Postface in which he describes the beginning of writing and its evolution until his own time. We have here a very interesting text allowing us to see reflections on the history and the theories concerning the Chinese writing by a Han scholar in the 1st century.

The text of the postface says approximately this:

The legendary sovereign Fu2xi1 (Paoxi) 伏羲, inspired by nature (natural patterns), first invented the ° trigrams of the Book of Change *Yijing*. Then the also legendary sovereign She2nno2ng 神農 used knots in rope to govern and regulate activities. And finally, Ca1ng Jie2, who was the scribe of the Mythical “Yellow Emperor” Hua2ngdi4, inspired by the marks left by the birds and the beasts on the soil invented writing. But for Xu3 She4n there was a gradual stage in this invention: Ca1ng Jie2 first set out by depicting patterns of things, and at this stage, he was not writing words, he was representing things through written emblems. Then later, a new development occurred when Ca1ng Jie2 used his images or written emblems to represent words of the spoken language by attaching (*yi4* 益) pronunciation to them, that is by attaching the phonetic dimension. We can see here the passage from depicting reality to writing the words describing reality.

Then the text goes on and apparently the Zhōu dynasty (XI^c-VIII^c-III^c) played an important role for the teaching of writing: First of all, we learn that it is during the Zhōu dynasty that 8 years old dignitary children had to learn the *liu4shu1 theory* 六書 “the Six ways of graphically representing words” defined as :1° 指事, 2° 象形, 3° 形聲, 4° 會意, 5° 轉注, 6° 假借

«1° [characters] referring to things, 2° symbolising shapes (picto), 3° expressing shape and sound, 4° associating ideas, 5° «*turningly* gloss>reinterpret??, and 6° borrowing [a graph for another].»

Secondly, it is also during the Zhōu dynasty, under the reign of King Xuān 宣 (827-780) that

¹ Born during Emperor Míngdì's 明帝 reign: 57-75 and died during Emperor Shùndì's 順帝 reign: 125-144.

the Great scribe Zhòu 籒 compiled a manual of characters in the “great seal style graphs” (*zhòuwén* 籒文, *dàzhuàn* 大篆) in 15 chapters. This is the first mention to a list of characters. At the same time, we learn that the “great seal style graphs” differed from the “ancient style graph” *gu3we2n* 古文 which was used by Confucius when he (supposedly) wrote the Six Classics.

Then came a time when feudal lords fought for independence against the central power of the Zhou, and each kingdom developed its own script. Later on, one of them led by Qi2n Shi3 hua2ngdi4 eventually unified China in 221 BC, and his prime minister Li3 Si1 wrote a manual of characters in the Qi2n tradition called *xia3ozhuàn* 小篆 “small seal style” that was a simplification of the “great seal style”. The Qi2n imposed the destruction of all the other ancient texts. Then, with the development of civil and judicial affairs, we learn that a new and faster style developed: the “clerical script” *lishū* 隸書, and that from that time on, the “ancient style” *gu3we2n* 古文 run out of use.

In order to show that the already forgotten “ancient style” *gu3we2n* 古文 connected with Confucius who used it to write the Classics, had really exist, XS recalls the fact that Old texts in this “ancient style” *gu3we2n* 古文 were discovered in the walls of the house of Confucius. [this event which is also mentioned in the *Hànshu*1 (30: 1705-06; 36: 1969; and 53: 2414) is quite important because it lead to a fight between scholars who believed in the tradition of these Old texts and those who did not. (The discovery probably happened sometimes between 157- 141 under Jingdi’s reign or 141-87 under Wudi’s reign)].

XS attributed a great importance to these Old texts on which he also based his dictionary and considered that only those ignoring the past could think that these texts were forgeries.

The postface goes on, but we already learned how writing appeared:

1° At first, combinations of lines broken or solid (referred to as the 8 trigrams) were invented. And these abstract signs symbolising reality were used for divination to read the world (be it) present or future;

2° then drawings imitating natural patterns were invented, and finally

3° these drawings were associated with words and their pronunciations.

The postface also explains why XS wrote his dictionary based on older style graphs such as “the “small seal style graph” and the “ancient style graph” (The tight connection between graphs and the meaning attached to them could be better explained when referring to ancient graphs.

3) Classifying the Chinese graphs: A new perspective on the *liùshū* theory 六書 “the Six ways of graphically representing words”

It should be remembered that two authors other than Xǔ Shèn 許慎 have also mentioned the the *liùshū* theory in the first century AD: The historian Bān Gù 班固 (32-92) in his

Monography on Arts and Literature (*Hànshū* 30, *Yìwénzhì* 藝文志) (SSJZS 1980: 1720), the commentator Zhèng Zhòng 鄭眾 (? -83), in his commentary on the *Zhōulǐ* 周禮 *Rites of Zhou* 14 (SSJZS 1980: 731). According to Táng Lán 唐蘭 (1979:67), the founder of Chinese grammatology in the thirties, the *liùshū* theory was probably created by the great Hàn scholar Liú Xīn 劉歆 (46BC - 23AD), who was in charge of the imperial library. These three authors were somehow his disciples. [In fact, Liú Xīn was the master of the father of Zhèng Zhòng, and he was also the master of the father of Jiǎ Kúí 賈逵 who was the master of Xǔ Shèn. As for Bān Gù he copied Liú Xīn's descriptive catalogue of the imperial library and reproduced it in his Monography on Arts and Literature.] Everything points to Liú Xīn 劉歆 as the inventor of the *liu4shu1* theory: Liú Xīn 劉歆 was also the promoter of the Old texts school. As we have seen before, the discovery of Old texts in the walls of the house of the descendants of Confucius, around the 1st c. B.C., gave birth to 2 main schools of interpretations of the Classics based on different textual traditions: proponents of Old texts (like Liú Xīn 劉歆, and later Xǔ Shèn 許慎) and proponents of New texts.

It is quite interesting to compare the 3 lists of *liu4shu1* 六書 because we can see 3 competing lists with different terms and orders:

Bān Gù 班固 (32-92) in his Monography on Arts and Literature (*Hànshū* 30, *Yìwénzhì* 藝文志)(SSJZS 1720):

象形	象事	象意	象聲	轉注	假借
² picto 'symbolise shapes'	abstract signs 'symbolise things'	ideogram 'symbolise ideas'	ideophongr. 'symbolise sounds'	<i>zhuanzhu</i>	borrowing> phonograms

Zhèng Zhòng 鄭眾 (? -83) in his commentary on the *Zhōulǐ* 周禮 *Rites of Zhou* 14 (SSJZS 731):

象形	會意	轉注	處事	假借	諧聲
picto 'symbolise shapes'	ideogram 'associate ideas'	<i>zhuanzhu</i>	abstract signs 'deals with things'	borrowing> phonograms	ideophongr. 'accomodate sounds'

Xǔ Shèn 許慎: (born during Emperor Míngdì's 明帝 reign: 57-75 and died during Emperor Shùndì's 順帝 reign: 125-144) in the Postface 後敘 of the *Shuō wén jiě zì* 說文解字: 15):

指事	象形	形聲	會意	轉注	假借
abstract signs 'refer to things'	picto 'symbolise shapes'	ideophongr. 'shape and sound'	ideogram 'associate ideas'	<i>zhuanzhu</i>	borrowing> phonograms

While Zhèng Zhòng's list is difficult to explain. Bān Gù and Xǔ Shèn's lists look much more similar but still bear some important differences. For example, there must be a reason for

² Under the Chinese terms I give the interpretation and the literal meaning.

them to reverse the four first terms and to use different names. Bān Gù was an historian: he wrote *The History book of the Hàn (Hanshu)*. Therefore we can easily imagine that he presented the *liu4shu1* 六書 in a chronological perspective. But as we have seen in his postface, Xǔ Shèn also described the history of writing. We can therefore imagine that he too presented the *liu4shu1* 六書 in the same way i.e.: chronological perspective. In fact, we can even find interesting parallels between XS's descriptions of what preceded the invention of writing and the 3 first terms of his list:

1° “signs referring to things” 指事 can be put in parallel with the 8 trigrams (the only 2 examples of “signs referring to things” in Xu Shen's dictionary are the graphs used for the words “up” and “down” which in ancient writing are represented by 二 and 一). They are written with two strokes, a long and a short one, and recall those used for the trigrams : *kūn* 坤 ☷ ‘Earth’, *gèn* 艮 ☶ ‘Mountain’, *kǎn* 坎 ☵ ‘Water’, *xùn* 巽 ☴ ‘Wind’, *zhèn* 震 ☳ ‘thunder’, *lí* 離 ☲ fire, *duì* 兌 ☱ ‘vapors’, *qián* 乾 ☰ ‘Heaven’.

2° “The pictograms [characters that symbolise shapes]” 象形 can be put in parallel with the imitation of nature by Cang Jie, at the beginning,

3° “the ideophonograms [the characters expressing shapes and sound]” 形聲 can be put in parallel with Cang Jie's addition of the phonetic dimension to pictures at the beginning of the invention of writing.

According to me, these three lists show that we already have different ways of seeing the beginning of writing in the 1st century: for Xu Shen, it started with abstract signs, but for Ban Gu, and Zheng Zhong it started with pictographic signs.

As the 18th century scholar Dài Zhèn 戴震 (1723-1777) has shown, the first 4 terms (in BG and XS's lists) are related to the creation of graphs and the last 2 ones to the use of already existing graphs. Therefore the 6 categories are not homogenous, and in fact one should be aware that the number 6 was of great significance for the Han. It recalled the six lines 一 -- broken or solid of the hexagrams in the *Yijing* (of great importance for Xu Shen), and it also recalled the *liù yì* 六義 “the 6 ways of classifying the poems” in the *Book of Poetry, Shijing*, under the categories *fēng* 風 "airs", *yá* 雅 "odes", *sòng* 頌 "hymns"; *fù* 賦 "recitatives", *bǐ* 比 "comparisons", and *xìng* 興 "associations". (Of also great importance for XS).

When dealing with the *liu4shu1* 六書 theory today, It is important to keep in mind that it was a theory developed during the Han dynasty, in a context of opposition between Old and New texts schools, and that it was profoundly influenced by the ideology of the time (numerology...), and adapted to the goals of the persons describing or using it. Last but not least, people using the *liu4shu1* 六書 theory to describe and explain the different kinds of characters today, usually use Ban Gu's order but Xu Shen's terms ignoring all the differences each of these authors had in mind when they changed orders and names. Besides, it is not sure whether it can really help analysing the Chinese characters, suffice to say that Xu Shen,

In the beginning of the 20th century, fragments of the *Cāngjiépiān* 倉頡篇 composed by Li3 Si1 (the prime minister of Qi2n Shi3 hua2ngdi) in 213 BC were discovered in different parts of China⁶. After the Qi2n, many modifications were made to the text, and it is not easy to know which version (Li3 Si1's or later modified versions) the fragments we found belong to. But from all these fragments we understand that the *Cāngjiépiān* was a composite text including some narratives passages, lists of synonyms, antonyms as well as all sorts of terms (F. Bottéro 2003).

Now, the oldest extant manual is the *Jijiù piān* 𠄎𠄎𠄎 written by Shǐ Yóu 𠄎𠄎 in the 1st c. B.C., (under the reign of Emperor Yuán 元 (49-33). It comprises 32 paragraphs and each paragraph contains 63 characters which makes a total of 2016 characters. The text is used today to practice calligraphy and is written in a cursive style (*zha1ng ca3o style* 𠄎𠄎), but originally it was probably written in the current style of the time, in a kind of “clerical style” *lishū* 隸書. The organisation of the *Jijiù piān* is quite particular. In the introduction the author insists on the originality of his text which can be really useful for those who want to learn writing to serve the government.

Before the end of the 1st paragraph until the 6th paragraph comes a list of fictive names, mostly monosyllabic but with some disyllabic ones⁷.

Then from 7th to 24th paragraph, the author presents different list of names classified according to certain themes such as:

- 7 - 8 fabric, silk, cloth, (colours and dyes)
- 8 - 9 market, weight and measures
- 9 -10 cereals, vegetables, sauces, spices and fruit
- 10 - 11 clothes: tunics, shoes, cloths of border peoples
- 11 - 12 metals and metallic objects : weapons, tools, vases
- 12 - 13 manufactured objects : bronze, bamboo, wood, potteries
 - aquatic animals : tadpoles, fish, crab
- 13 - 14 women, servants
 - furniture of the sleeping room
- 15 musical instruments
- 15 - 16 cuisine : cook, firewood, charcoal
 - taste, food, drinks
- 16 -17 body parts
- 17 - 18 weapons and carts /chars, equipment for horses (saddle, leather)
- 18 - 19 buildings,
- 19 - 20 terms related to farming
 - trees
- 20 - 22 animals

⁶ 20 fragments (dating from 90 to 30 BC) in Juyan 𠄎𠄎 (Etsin-gol), were found in Western Mongolia, in 1930, 1972 and 1976 (cf. Lao Gan 𠄎, *Juyan hanjian kaoshi* 𠄎𠄎; 135 fragments were found in Fuyang 𠄎 (Anhui province), in 1977, in a tomb closed in 165 BC (cf. Hu Pingsheng et Han Ziqiang 1983); 3 fragments, in 1977, in Yumen huahai 𠄎 (Gansu) (cf. Hu Pingsheng 1996, p. 342. and one fragment, in 1979, in Dunhuang Maquanwan 𠄎 (Gansu) (cf. Hu 1996, p. 344).

⁷ Such as Simǎ Bǎo 司馬褒, Gōngsūn Dū 公孫都, Línghú Héng 令狐橫, etc. We can also grasp among names special expressions such as *Ya2nnia2n* 延年 “prolong life” or *wa4nsui4* 萬歲 “long life!” It was probably meant to help the student learn such expressions.

- 22 diseases
 23 - 24 pharmacopeia
 24 religious and ritual domains
24-31
 24 - 26 Presentation of the titles for officials and what they correspond to
 27 - 30 general presentation on justice and laws
 31 the text ends on a passage glorifying the Hàn.

In conclusion, this was just a little outline to stimulate discussions and comparisons between our different writings systems.

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