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An Analysis of *wǔ*'s 武 (martial) Graphic Form and Its Development of Interpretation

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Date: 10 October 2025

Introduction

This PowerPoint examines the chronological development of the graphic form and meaning of the Chinese character *wu*, and addresses the gap in its interpretation by illustrating the development of *wu*'s explanation.

Section One presents a diachronic study of *wu*'s graphic form and meaning, covering three main stages: the Oracle Bone Inscription, Bronze Script Inscription, and Small Seal Script. However, an interpretative gap exists between the second and third graphical stages. Section Two closes this gap by tracing the development of *wu*'s interpretation from the Eastern Han (25–220 BCE) period to contemporary times.

Section One: A Diachronic Study of *wu*'s Graphic Form and Meaning

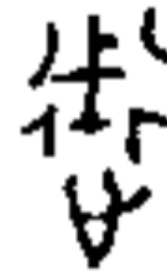
In this section, each stage involves analysing *wu*'s form and its meaning. For meanings, as many interpretations exist in academia, this study selects only representative ones due to word limitations. And please refer to Appendix One for all original statements.

1.1 Oracle bone inscription

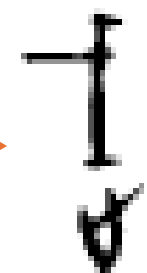
1.1.1 Graphic form one: As many 20th and 21st century scholars stated, when traced to the graphic origins of the character *wu*, it has an orthograph which was composed by a walking radical (*xing* 行), an axe (*ge* 戈), and a foot (*zhi* 止) (Figure 1).

1.1.2 Meaning one: According to Yu Yongliang 余永梁 (modern scholar, dates unknown), this orthograph assembles a soldier holding an axe, walking on a road to fight bravely.

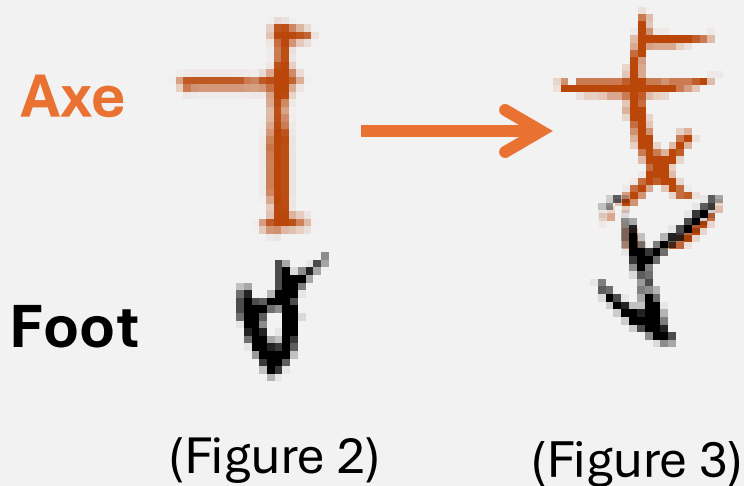
Later, this form was abbreviated by abridging the walking radical, leaving only an axe and a foot (Figure 2). The abbreviated form of *wu* was dominant in all graphical stages since the oracle bone inscription.



(Figure 1)



(Figure 2)



1.1.3 Graphic form two: Following the graphic evolution, after the walking radical was abbreviated, *wu*'s form was maintained with a top-down construction in the oracle bone inscription: an axe above a foot (Figure 2).

Moreover, as the *Collection of Ancient Characters in China* (*guwenzi gulin* 古文字詁林) demonstrates, during this time, in most cases, the graph which represents an axe was drafted in its independent form, *ge* (戈), and is transmitted in this form until modern ages (Figure 3).

1.1.4 Meaning two: Yu Xingwu 于省吾 (1896–1984) stated, as *wu*'s graphic form was composed by an axe and a foot, it means demonstrating power through armed force. As a conqueror must walk, a foot indicates walking; as a conqueror must hold a weapon, an axe represents a weapon.

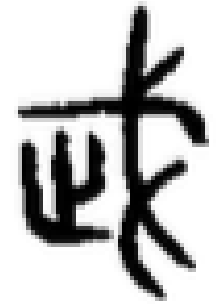
1.2 Bronze script inscription

1.2.1 Graphic form one: Two main features can be observed during this stage.

First, compared to the relatively fixed top-down structure in oracle bone inscriptions, the bronze script inscriptions evolved into a semi-enclosed structure, with the foot located in the lower-right corner and partly surrounded by an elongated axe (Figure 4). According to the *Collection of Ancient Characters in China*, this evolved form appeared in two-thirds of character examples in this period.

However, the top-down structure still existed in a minority (Figure 5).

Second, the graph representing the foot evolved into its independent form, which is the character *zhi* (止) in regular script.



(Figure 4)



(Figure 5)

1.2.2 Graphic form two: Notably, in some Western Zhou bronze vessels, such as the Li ritual food basin (*li gui* 利簋) and Yu ritual cauldron (*yu ding* 盂鼎), character *wu* in the name of King Wu of Zhou 周武王 (c. r. 1056–1043 BCE) features written with a ‘king’ (*wang* 王) component. This was done to honour the king and express the inscriber’s respect.

Typically, this component is added to the left side of the character, with the foot and axe portions either semi-enclosed (Figures 6) or arranged from top to bottom (Figure 7).



(Figure 6)



(Figure 7)

1.2.3 Meaning: The interpretation of the bronze script inscription form is largely consistent with the abbreviated oracle bone inscription. According to Zhu Fangpu 朱芳圃 (1895–1973), the axe is a weapon for combat, and the foot means walking. The entire character represents a soldier brandishing his weapon to press ahead.

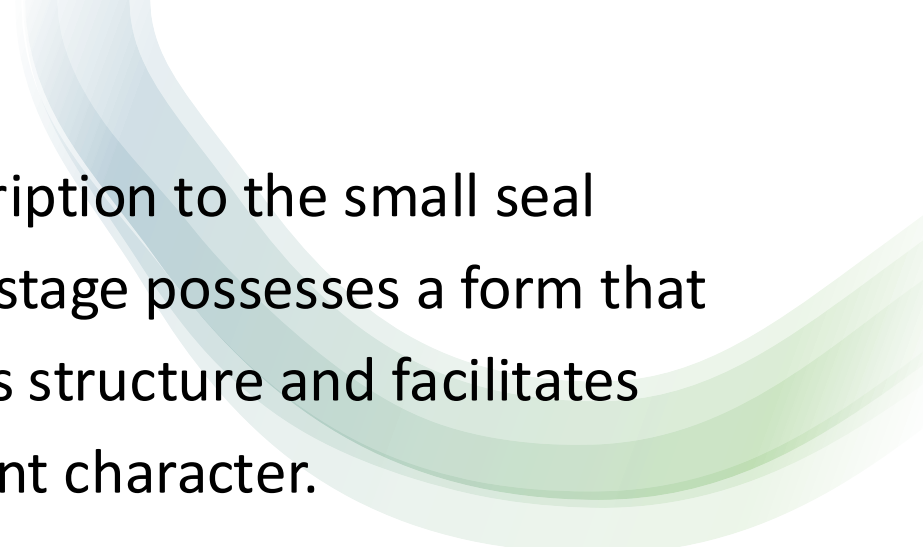
1.3 Small seal script

1.3.1 Graphic form: According to the *Explaining Simple Graphs and Analysing Compound Characters* (*shuowen jiezi* 說文解字), the small seal script has a fixed top-down structure, placing “axe (*ge* 戈)” at the top and “foot (*zhi* 止)” at the bottom (Figure 8).

1.3.2 Meaning: The *Shuowen* explains this character by quoting King Zhuang of Chu’s 楚莊王 (613–591 BCE) statement. His explanation sheds light on both the meaning and the graphic form of this character. King Chu states, “As for military power, it is to establish achievements and lay aside arms. Therefore, to stop brandishing axes is the meaning of *wu*.” The latter part also could be read as “‘stop’ and ‘axe’ forming the character *wu*.”



(Figure 8)



As we observe in Section One, from the oracle bone inscription to the small seal script, the form of *wu* remains relatively stable, as every stage possesses a form that is composed of an axe and a foot; evolution only alters its structure and facilitates components' transit from a graph to a proper independent character.

However, the meaning is a different picture. A significant meaning conversion lay between the second and third stages. In the first two stages, *wu* means a soldier holds a weapon to advance, forming a pattern that is both active and dynamic. But in the last stage, the interpretation for the small seal script suddenly changed into a conservative and static one, as the character *zhi* no longer represents foot to express the meaning of walking, but means stop; to stop wielding the axe is the meaning of *wu*. Since the form did not experience a significant change, how could this seemingly illogical meaning conversion happen?

Section Two: The Development of *wu*'s Interpretation

As an interpretation gap exists between the second and third stages, this section addresses it by examining the developmental trait of *wu*'s interpretation.

Although we have chronologically divided the evolution of the *wu*'s form into three stages—Oracle Bone Inscription, Bronze Script Inscription, and Small Seal Script—their scholarly interpretation emerged in reverse order. This is due to the distinction between the period when a writing system was actively used, and the later periods when it was deciphered and analysed by scholars.

Oracle bone inscriptions were discovered in the late Qing dynasty (1899), and their systematic decipherment took place in the early 20th century. As for bronze script, although bronze vessels began to be unearthed as early as the Qin (221–207 BCE) and Han (202 BCE–220 CE) dynasties, large-scale research and interpretation only flourished during the late Qing dynasty. In contrast, small seal script, which was preserved and annotated in the *Shuowen*, was the earliest to be systematically interpreted, dating back to the Western Han dynasty (25–220).

Thus, the sequence of interpretative development can be reconstructed as follows: Small Seal Script (Eastern Han), followed by Bronze Script Inscription and Oracle Bone Inscription (both in the late Qing dynasty).

With this chronological framework established, a key question remains: how did later scholars come to challenge, and in some cases overturn, the widely accepted interpretations found in the *Shuowen*?

To answer this question, I systematically analyse interpretations from 29 scholars from the Eastern Han to modern days (See Appendix Two for their names and works). After that, I summarised this gradual interpretation conversion into three stages: agree, supplement the *Shuowen*'s interpretation, and disagree. However, due to word limitations, the following examination will only reference representative explanations. For the original statements, please reference Appendix One.

2.1 Agreement with the *Shuowen*'s interpretation

Most scholars supported the *Shuowen*'s interpretation before the late Qing dynasty, when the oracle bone inscription had not been unearthed and deciphered.

This attitude could be corroborated by most of the scholars who did annotations and interpretations of the *Shuowen*, such as Xu Kai's 徐鍇 (920–974) work, *Filiation of and Commentary on the Explaining Simple Graphs and Analysing Compound Characters* (*shuowen jiezi xizhuan* 說文解字系傳), and the “Four Great Scholars of the *Shuowen* (*shuowen sida jia* 說文四大家)”, including Duan Yucai 段玉裁 (1735–1815), Gui Fu 桂馥 (1736–1805), Wang Yun 王筠 (1784–1854), and Zhu Junsheng 朱駿聲 (1788–1858), who agree and proffer a detailed explanation of Xu Shen's 許慎 (c. 58–147) interpretation.

2.2 Supplement the *Shuowen*'s interpretation

Interestingly, besides agreeing with Xu Shen, the Four Great Scholars of the *Shuowen* also supplemented the meaning of *wu* by incorporating different interpretations from other character dictionaries and classics.

For instance, Duan Yucai in his *Annotation to the Explaining Simple Graphs and Analysing Compound Characters* (*shuowen jiezi zhu* 說文解字註), introduces an alternative meaning of *wu* by citing a line in the *Book of Odes* (*shijing* 詩經), where it means “footprint” or “trace” (*ji* 迹). Coincidentally, Zhu Junsheng also referred to this supplemented meaning in his work.

Further evidence emerges in the works of the other two prominent *Shuowen* scholars, Gui Fu and Wang Yun. Both cite the Western Han dictionary *Explanations of Names* (*shi ming* 釋名), which employs phonetic gloss (*sheng xun* 聲訓) to link *wu* with “to dance (*wu* 舞)”. This connection suggests that *wu* resembles the movement and action of expenditure, evoking a sense of things being “stirred” and “aroused”.

These supplementary interpretations do more than just expand upon Xu Shen’s definition; they also highlight the room for improvement in the *Shuowen*’s original explanation. Furthermore, as most of these scholarly additions carry a sense of motion and action, they indicate that the character *wu* likely embodies a more dynamic and active meaning than the passive connotation of “stop fighting”.

2.3 Disagreement with the *Shuowen*'s interpretation

Following the era of the Four Great Scholars of the *Shuowen*, supplementing Xu Shen's interpretation of *wu* became more frequent within academia, fueled by recurrent references to its “fighting” meaning in various classics. However, it was the discovery and subsequent decipherment of oracle bone inscriptions in the late Qing dynasty that made the supplemented meaning supersede the *Shuowen*'s explanation. This shift was substantiated by two key findings: an earlier orthograph of *wu* found in excavated scripts, and a revised understanding of the character *zhi* (foot; stop 止).

Luo Zhenyu 羅振玉 (1866–1940), a pioneering scholar in oracle bone inscription studies, was the first to propose that the ancient form of *wu* consisted of a walking radical (行), an axe (戈), and a foot (止) (See Figure 1, page 3). Yu Yongliang later elaborated on this interpretation, describing it as a soldier marching courageously down a road while holding an axe.

Furthermore, many researchers recognised that the core divergence between the *Shuowen*'s explanation and the meaning conveyed by the newly discovered script lay in the interpretation of *zhi*. While Xu Shen, citing King Zhuang of Chu, defined *zhi* as “to stop,” a detailed analysis of oracle bone inscriptions reveals that *zhi* is itself a pictograph depicting the outline of a foot, conveying the meaning “to walk”.

The original meaning of *zhi* is revealed through its function as a semantic component in other oracle bone characters. For instance, the character for “walking slowly” (*bu* 步) consists of two mirrored *zhi* graphs, depicting left feet positioned in front of the right feet (Figure 9). Another example is the character for “arrive” (*ge* 各), which combines a foot oriented toward a representation of a dwelling, conveying the image of someone reaching a destination (Figure 10). Since both characters use *zhi* to convey the notion of walking or movement, scholars conclude that *zhi* within the character *wu* must likewise carry the meaning of “to walk” rather than “to stop”.



(Figure 9)



(Figure 10)

In the analysis of Section Two, we can trace the supplement of, and the disagreement with, the *Shuowen* explanation.

This evolution progresses from general acceptance by pre-imperial scholars, to a more meticulous referencing of the explanations and usages of *wu* within received character dictionaries and classics, and culminates in decisive disagreement following the discovery of earlier scripts and the subsequent reinterpretation of a key component.

Therefore, the seemingly illogical semantic shift in Section One can be resolved by introducing a temporal dimension. The conversion becomes logical when we carefully situate the divergent interpretations of scholars within their specific historical contexts and the evidence available to them.

3. Conclusion

This study has illustrated the evolution of the character *wu*, providing a foundational overview of its graphic development and meaning evolution. Furthermore, the analysis underscores the critical importance of a diachronic perspective in tracing a character's meaning.

Despite these insights, key questions regarding *wu*'s explanation in the *Shuowen* persist. First, under what specific circumstances did King Zhuang of Chu initially assert this explanation? Second, why did Xu Shen adopt King Chu's words to explain *wu*? A detailed investigation into these questions will be presented in the subsequent assessment.

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- Zhonghua yuwen zhishi ku hanzi yuanliu 中華語文知識庫 漢字源流 <https://www.chinese-linguipedia.org/search_source.html> [accessed 5 October 2025]

Appendix One: Original statements of scholars

(In the sequence of birth date, and quoted interpretations with colour.)

1. 許慎《說文解字》：「楚莊王曰：『夫武，定功戢兵。故止戈為武。』」
2. 徐鍇《說文解字系傳》：「楚莊王曰：『夫武，定功戢兵，故止戈為武』，文甫反。」
3. 段玉裁《說文解字註》：「楚莊王曰。莊、上諱也。不當用。古莊壯通用。謚法固取壯非取艸。周書。兵甲亟作、莊。睿圉克服、莊。勝敵志強、莊。武而不遂、莊。皆壯字也。後人以莊代之耳。此莊王必本作壯。若諱莊之字曰嚴、乃漢法。許則從左氏古文。典下云。莊都說。亦當作壯。晉語有壯馳茲。蓋古姓本作壯。後乃盡改為莊。夫武定功戢兵。故止戈為武。宣十二左傳文。此隳樁楚莊王語以解武義。莊王曰。於文止戈為武。是倉頡所造古文也。祇取定功戢兵者、以合於止戈之義也。文之會意已明。故不言从止戈。文甫切。五部。〈大雅〉『履帝武敏。』傳曰：『武，迹也。』此武之別一義也。」

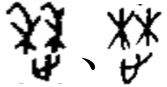
4. 桂馥《說文解字義證》：「本書會意者，比類合誼，以見指撝，武信是也。《釋名》：『武，舞也。征伐動行，如物鼓舞也。』故〈樂記〉曰：『發揚蹈厲，太公之志也。』楚莊王云：『夫武，禁暴、戢兵、保大、定功、安民、和眾、豐財者也。』《漢書·武五子傳》：『是以倉韻作書，止戈為武。聖人以武禁暴整亂，止息兵戈，非以為賤而興縱之也。』《顏氏家訓》：『客有難主人曰：「今之經典，子皆謂非，說文所言，于皆云是，然則許慎勝孔子乎？」主人拊掌大笑，應之曰：「今之經典，皆孔子手跡耶？」客曰：「今之說文，皆許慎手跡乎？」答曰：「許慎檢以六文，貫以部分，使不得誤，誤則覺之。孔子存其義而不論其文也。先儒尚得臨文從意，何況書寫流傳耶？必如左傳止戈為武，反正為乏，皿蟲為蠱，亥有二首六身之類，後人自不得輒改也，安敢以說文校其是非哉？」』」

5. 王筠《說文句讀》：「楚莊舉七德，此取其二者，定功而後戢兵，戢兵即是止戈。其它與止戈不合，故不取也。然門、聞、戶、護，雖不須說之字，亦必說之，此獨無說，乃闕佚也。《釋名》：『武，舞也，征伐行動，如物鼓舞也。文甫切。』」

《說文釋例》：「武字說解，與車部輔字同一苟且，必後人刪節。凡觀說解，毋論長短，其從容古雅者，皆原文也。匆遂而詰屈者，皆唐之試字科者所刪改也。」

6. 朱駿聲《說文解字通訓定聲》：「《左氏春秋》宣公十二年傳，楚莊王曰：『夫文，止戈為武。』又曰：『夫武，禁暴、戢兵、保大、定功、安民、和眾、豐財者也。』說文本此，从止戈，會意。《春秋元命苞》：『武者，伐也。』《廣雅·釋詁二》：『武，勇也。』又『健也。』《易·履》：『武人為于大君。』《偽禹謨》：『乃武乃文。』《詩·長髮》：『武王載旆。』《傳》：『湯也。』《周禮·大司樂》：『大濩大武。』《禮記·祭統》：『舞莫重于武宿夜。』注：『武宿夜，武，曲名也。』《爾雅·釋地》：『空桐之人武。』

又《周禮·諡法》：『威彊敵德曰武，克定禍亂曰武，刑民克服曰武，夸志多窮曰武。』
又《海內東經》：『章武。』注：『郡名。』別義：《爾雅·釋訓》：『武，迹也。』
〈釋詁〉：『武，繼也。』此誼似字从止戈聲。《詩·下武》：『下武維周，繩其祖
武。』〈生民〉：『履帝武敏歆。』〈武〉：『嗣武受之。』《儀禮·士相見禮》：
『武舉前曳踵。』〈鄉射禮〉：『下綱不及地武。』《禮記·曲禮》：『堂上接武，堂
下布武。』又牛曰：『一元大武。』〈離騷〉：『及前王之踵武。』又《周語》：『不
過步武尺寸之間。』註：『半步為武。』何承天《纂要》：『三尺曰武。或曰：字實借
為步、為拊。拊亦足也。』存參。假借為幬。《禮記·雜記》：『委武元縞而後蕤。』
註：『委武，冠卷也。秦人曰委，齊東曰武。』〈玉藻〉「縞冠元武。」註：「冠卷也。」
古者冠卷殊是，知漢時冠卷共材。又為無。』〈禮器〉：『詔侑武方』又疊韻連語。
海內經有九邶，曰：『武夫之邶。』註：『此山出美名，字俗作砮砮。』又《中山經》：
『青要之山，魍武羅司之。』註：『神名也，又托名識字。』《穀梁》：『蔡侯獻武。』
《左傳》作舞。〈燕策〉『秦武陽』，《史記》作舞。聲訓：《釋名》：『舞也，征伐
動行，如物鼓舞也。』古韻（暫不錄）。』

7. 羅振玉《殷虛書契考釋》：「𠂔從行從武，此步武之本字。後世經典借武字為之，而專字亾矣。」
8. 朱芳圃《殷周文字釋叢》：「戈，兵器；止，足趾，所以行走，象揮戈前進也。字之結構，與旋相同。旋，甲文、金文作左列諸形：《說文》从部：『旋，周旋，旌旗之指麾也。从从，从足；足也。』徐鍇曰：『人足隨旌旗以周旋也。』武从戈从止，猶旋从从从足矣。《春秋元命苞》：『武者伐也。』此本義也。《廣雅·釋詁》：『武，勇也』又『武。健也。』引申之義也。」
9. 于省吾《雙劍謠古文雜釋》：「《說文》武。楚莊王曰：『夫武定功戢兵，故止戈為武。』按左宣十二年傳：『楚子曰：夫文，止戈為武。』《漢書·武五子傳》：『是以倉頡作書，止戈為武。』按止戈為武之說，自來學者多無異議。惟俞樾《兒笈錄》云：『在倉頡造字時。則但以為足止字，而無此展轉相生之義也。乃謂武字从止為取止戈之意，豈得其本義哉。然則武字本義謂何，曰：武、舞古同字，武即舞字也。按俞氏不從止戈之訓，至具卓識。惟謂武即舞，以借字為本字誤矣。古文無即初文舞字，金文亦作𠂔。古文从止之字，就狹義言之，限於足之止。就廣義言之，則表示人類行動之義。故徐行為步作。由卑而升曰陟作。由高而卑為降作。行所經為歷作，象人行田中或林中。行在前為𠂔。却行為復。自他至為各。均詳羅振玉釋止。（貞松遺稿一至四）。

又按徙為移動，金文作。衛字作，象衆人之圈守城邑。古文从止从走从止每互作無別，均有行動之意。武从止从戈，本義為征伐示威。征伐者必有行，止即示行也；征伐者必以武器，戈即武器也。許氏以楚莊王說武之斷章取義為武之本義，豈其然乎。」

10. 余永梁《殷墟文字續考》：「（書契卷六二十三葉）案此武氏初文。从行从止从戈，操戈行於道上，赳赳武也。觚文。敦文，為旂字初文，象人持旂以行也，下以止，與此同例。是踵武伐武之武乃武之本義。後省行作。猶道字散盤从行作。曾伯簠字作。从又與从止通，篆文省作。而說文古文遂省行作矣。宣十二 years 左傳『楚子曰：夫文止戈為武』，謂止兵為武，以象形為會意。乃望文之訓，非朔儀也。」

Appendix Two: Scholars' names and titles of analysed works

(In the sequence of birth date, and cited scholars with colour)

Number	Name	Book title
0	許慎	《說文解字》
1	徐鍇	《說文解字系傳》
2	鄭樵	《通志二十略》
3	李从周	《字通》
4	吳玉搢	《說文引經考》
5	段玉裁	《說文解字註》
6	桂馥	《說文解字義證》
7	邵瑛	《說文解字群經正字》
8	錢坫	《說文斠詮》

Number	Name	Book title
9	紐樹玉	《說文解字校錄》
10	王筠	《說文句讀》、《說文釋例》
11	朱駿聲	《說文解字通訓定聲》
12	俞樾	《兒笈錄》
13	羅振玉	《增訂殷墟書契考》
14	田吳炤	《說文解字二徐箋異》
15	王襄	《簠室殷契類纂》
16	葉玉森	《殷墟書契前編集釋》
17	馬敘倫	《說文解字六書疏證》
18	朱芳圃	《殷周文字釋叢》
19	于省吾	《雙劍謠古文雜釋》

Number	Name	Book title
20	容肇祖	《容肇祖全集》
21	商承祚	〈中山大學語言歷史研究所週刊〉
22	余永梁	《殷墟文字續考》
23	戴家祥	《金文大字典》
24	承培元	《說文引經正例》
25	金祖同	《殷契遺珠》
26	饒宗頤	《殷代貞卜人物通考》
27	李孝定	《甲骨文字集釋》
28	沈文元	〈止戈為武解〉
29	方述鑫	〈考古與文物〉1986.04



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