

Xu Shen's Postface to the Shuo Wen Jie Zi

In the past, when Pao Xi 庖犧 (=Fu Xi 伏羲) ruled over the world, he looked up and observed the features in the sky, looked down and observed the patterns on the earth. He watched the markings on birds and beasts and observed how they were adapted to the earth. Nearby, he selected [features] from his own body and distantly he selected [features] from nature. Then he began to create the eight trigrams of the Changes, to hand down the regular patterns.

When it came to Shen Nong 神農 who made knots on rope to create order and to regulate activities, multitudinous trades and professions flourished, whereupon refined and artificial things sprouted and grew.

The Yellow Emperor's scribe Cang Jie 倉頡 saw the traces of the feet of birds and beasts, realized that their differing principles could be distinguished and became the first to make script notches. By this means the hundred crafts could be regulated and the myriad categories could be scrutinized. [For this] he probably chose from [the hexagram] guai 夬: "Guai [means] to exhibit in the King's court" (Yijing 易經, Harvard-Yenching Index 26/43). This means that the patterns [of culture] are spread and taught and that they exercise a civilizing influence at the court of the King. "This is the means by which the superior man bestows benefits so that they reach to his subordinates. When occupying a position of virtue one must be cautious." (Yijing, Harvard-Yenching Index 27/43).

When Cang Jie first created writing he depicted the various forms in accordance with their categories. Therefore he referred to these [graphs] as wen 文 ("designs"). Thereafter, when shape and sound were used to complement one another, he referred to these [graphs] as zi 字 ("compound graphs"). This term zi 字 ("to breed, to rear; written character") indicates that the graphs were bred and reared and that they gradually multiplied. When written on bamboo and silk one refers to them as shu 書 (Archaic 𠄎, "writing"). Shu means ru (Archaic 𠄎, "to be alike").

When it came to the time of The Five Emperors and The Three Kings (i.e. the legendary rulers of antiquity and the founders of the three dynasties Xia 夏, Shang 商 and Zhou 周) writing was changed and altered into different styles. Of the 72 generations [of rulers] who performed the Feng 封 sacrifice on Mount Tai 泰 none used a common standard [of writing].

The Zhou Li 周禮 says: "At the age of eight sui one enters into the study of philology. In teaching the sons of the nobles the Protector begins with the six types of graphs." (This passage is not found in the modern version of the Zhou Li). The first type is called zhishi 指事 ("indicators"). The term zhishi means that the meaning of such graphs can be grasped and understood from inspection. Examples are 上 shang ("above") and 下 xia ("below"). The second type is called xiangxing 象形 ("pictographs"). This term indicates that one depicts the object in question and, following its outline, draws curved lines. 日 (Archaic ☉), rì ("sun") and 月 (Archaic ☾) yue ("moon") are examples of this. The third type is called xingsheng 形聲 ("shape and sound"). This term indicates that one chooses a particular feature as the namer and then establishes the graph by comparing [the sound of the graph with that of its phonetic]. 江 jiang ("river") and 河 he ("stream") are examples of this. (The two characters 江 and 河 share one "namer" or radical, viz. 氵 "water". 工 gong (Archaic kung) serves as phonetic in jiang 江 (Archaic kǔng), and 可 ke (Archaic k'â) serves as phonetic in 河 he (Archaic g'â). The fourth type is called huiyi 會意 ("combined meaning"). This term indicates that one compares categories and joins together their correct principles in order to make appear what is indicated and signalled. The character 武 wu ("martial") (which is composed of the graphs for "foot" and "dagger-axe") and the character 信 xìn ("trust", which is composed of the graphs for "man" and "words") are examples of this type. The fifth type is called zhuanzhu 轉注 ("interchanging notation"). This term indicates that one establishes one category and that graphs with a common meaning are received under the category. The character 考 kao ("high age") and the character 老 lao ("old") are examples of this type. The sixth type is called jiajie 假借 ("loan characters"). This term denotes forms which originally did not have any character and for which one depended on the sound of another character. The character 令 lìng (which may mean both "command" and "honourable") and the character 長 cháng (which, read zhāng, means "to grow", and, read cháng, means "long") are examples of this type.

When it came to the time of King Xuan 宣 (827-782 B.C.), his Grand Scribe Zhou 籒 wrote [a book on the] great seal script in 15 sections. These graphs sometimes differ from the guwen 古文 ("Ancient script"). When Master Kong 孔 (Confucius) wrote down The Six Classics and when Zuo Qiuming 左丘明 narrated [the chronicle] Chunqiu zhuan 春秋傳 they both used the ancient script. Their meaning can be grasped and expounded upon.

When Shi Huang Di 始皇帝 of Qin 秦 (246-210 B.C.) unified the realm, His Prime Minister Li Si 李斯 memorialized to the effect that the written language should be unified and that all graphs which did not conform to the Qin standard should be abolished. Li Si wrote the Cang Jie Treatise 倉頡篇, Zhao Gao 趙高,

the supervisor of the Emperor's travel, wrote the Yuan Li Treatise 元歷篇, the Grand Astrologer Huwu Jing 胡毋敬 wrote the Bo Xue Treatise 博學篇. They all used the great seal characters of the Scribe Zhou which they simplified and changed into what is known as the small seal.

At this time [the ruler of] Qin burned the canonical literature and did away with old institutions and laws. He greatly developed the civil and the military service, recruited officers to supervise corvé labour and the border defences, which led to an increase of duties concerned with legal matters. For the first time one now had the clerical style of writing, and with it a tendency toward simplification. On this account the ancient script was discontinued.

Subsequently there were eight styles of writing in the Qin period. The first was the great seal (da zhuan 大篆), the second was the small seal (xiao zhuan 小篆), the third the inscribed tally (ke fu 刻符), the fourth the worm style (chong 蟲書). The fifth is called the seal stamp (mo yin 摹印), the sixth is called the official style (shu shu 署書), the seventh is called the weapon style (shu shu 武書) and the eighth is called the clerical style (li shu 隸書). At the rise of the Han 漢 dynasty (206 B.C. - A.D. 220) the cursive style (cao shu 草書) developed.

According to the Wei Lǚ 尉律 ("Police Law") section [of the Han Code] male students of 17 sui and older were required to recite Zhou 籀 writing to the extent of 9000 characters in their first examination. Only after having passed this examination could they be accepted as officials. They must also be examined in the eight styles of writing. From the prefectures they were sent to the Grand Astrologer who tested them together. The best among them were appointed scribes at the Imperial Secretariat. Should there be a mistake in their writing, the culprit was promptly reported and tried. At present, although there are still police laws, examinations are no longer held and the study of philology is not cultivated. For a long time no one has arrived at a full understanding of the theories [of philology].

At the time of Emperor Xiao Xuan 孝宣 (74-49 B.C.) those were summoned who were well versed in the readings of the Cang Jie Treatise. Zhang Chang 張敞 received his instruction in the text from them. Du Ye 杜業, prefect of Liangzhou 涼州, Yuan Li 苑光 of Pei and the Imperial Scholar Qin Jin 秦近 could also recite it. At the time of Emperor Xiao Ping 孝平 (A.D. 1-5) the Emperor summoned [Yuan] Li and others - more than a hundred scholars - and ordered them to explain the graphs in the Weiyang 未央 palace. [Yuan] Li was appointed First Scholar in philology. Yang Xiong 楊雄, Attendant of the Yellow Gate,

collected [these explanations] and compiled them into the Xun Zuan Pian 訓纂篇. Since Cang Jie and onwards there have been 14 treatises, comprising altogether 5340 graphs. All the characters in the various books were preserved in these treatises.

When the [now] lost house of Xin 新 (A.D. 9423) usurped the Throne [the Emperor] ordered the Chief Minister of Public Works, Zhen Feng 甄豐 and others to collate books in the section of writing. They themselves considered that they ought to create [something anew] and [therefore] to some extent emended and revised the ancient script. At that time there were six styles of writing. The first was the ancient script, used in the works found in the wall of Master Kong's (Confucius) house. The second type were the odd characters (qi zi 奇字) which actually are variants of the ancient script. The third type was the seal script, i.e. the small seal which was created by Cheng Miao 程邈 of Xiadu on the order of the First Emperor of Qin. The fourth type was the administrative style, i.e. the clerical style of Qin. The fifth was the twisted seal (jiu zhuan 繆篆) which was used in stamps. The sixth was the bird-and-worm script which was used for writings on banners and tallies.

As to the books in the wall [of Confucius' house], Prince Gong 魯 of Lu 魯 destroyed Master Kong's house and found the Liji 禮記 ("The Rituals"), the Shangshu 尚書 ("The Book of Documents"), the Chunqiu 春秋 ("The Spring and Autumn Annals"), the Lunyu 論語 ("The discourses") and the Xiaojing 孝經 ("The Book of Filial Piety"). Again, Zhang Cang 張倉, the Marquis of the Northern Peace, presented the Chunqiu Zuoshi zhuan 春秋左氏傳

In the various princedoms tripods and vessels are often found in the mountains and the streams. Their inscriptions which are in the ancient script all resemble one another. Although the ancient development [of this script] can no longer be observed, the details can be explained in broad outlines. And yet people of our time on the whole reject and slander [those who have found these ancient vessels] and consider them to be fond of curiosities, [stating that they] intentionally fake and alter the correct texts and, facing the wall, fabricate unintelligible writing, thereby changing and wrecking constant practices in order to shine before the world. The various scholars compete with one another in explaining compound graphs and in interpreting the classics. They propagate the idea that the clerical style of Qin is the writing from the time of Cang Jie. They say that this writing has been passed down from father to son, so how could it have been subjected to change. And so they erroneously state that [the graph of] a horse's head and [the graph of] a man make up the character chang 長, that [the graph of] a man grasping shi 十 make up the character shi 十, and that 虫 chong represents a bent 中 zhong.

When the police magistrates explain the statutes they go so far as to decide the law cases according to the characters. In the expression he ren shou qian 苛人受錢 ("to reprimand a person who receives cash bribes") the character he 苛 ("to reprimand") is explained as a combination of zhi 止 ("to detain") and gou 勾 ("to seize"). Such cases are very numerous and they do not conform to the ancient script of Confucius. They also deviate from the norm of Scribe Zhou. Vulgar scholars and crude people take pleasure in that in which they are versed and cover up that which they rarely hear of. Not coming into contact with penetrating scholarship and not even having seen the principles of character composition they find the old tendencies strange and value crude opinions. They consider their own knowledge a secret marvel and feel that they investigate and go to the bottom of the subtle ideas of the Sage. And again, when they in the Cang Jie Treatise read the passage "the younger son receives the mandate", they claim that this was written by an ancient emperor and that therefore this statement possesses the magical power of spirits and immortals. They are not themselves aware of their delusion. Is not this confusing?

The Shangshu ("The Book of Documents") says: "I wish to observe the designs of men of the past." This means that one must follow and study the old writing and not distort it. Confucius said: "Even I reach to the time when the historian left blanks in his text. This is no longer so." (Lunyu, Harvard-Yenching Index 32/15/26). It is not that [the historians of the past] lacked knowledge and that they did not ask [others]. [They left blanks in their texts, because] if men used their own judgment, right and wrong would have no standard and clever statements and heterodox pronouncements would have sown doubt among the scholars of the world.

It is obviously so that writing is the foundation of classical learning and the beginning of the Royal Way. It is by means of writing that former generations passed on [culture] to later generations and it is by the same means that later generations will understand the past. Therefore it is said: "When the root has been established the Way will grow." (Lunyu, Harvard-Yenching Index 1/1/2). "When you know the greatest dispute of the world you cannot become confused."

Now I have arranged the small seal graphs and joined them to the ancient Zhou graphs. I have widely adopted from [the opinions of] great scholars. As to the small (seal?) and the great (seal?) I have consulted and discoursed upon such statements [by other scholars] as are trustworthy and can be corroborated. By this means I intended to bring order into the various categories, to correct mistakes, and to rouse scholars to a penetrating understanding of the subtleties [of the script]. I have divided the graphs into

groups, so that they should not be confused. All things may be seen here, nothing has been omitted. In cases where the meaning is not clear I clarify by means of examples.

References to the Yi ("The Changes") are to the edition of Meng Xi 孟喜. For the Shu ("The Book of Documents") I have used the edition of Kong Anguo 孔安國, and for the Shi 詩 ("The Book of Odes") I have used the edition by Mao Gong 毛公. As for the Li ("The Rituals"), the Zhou Guan 周官 (Zhou Li 周禮), the Chunqiu 春秋 ("The Spring and Autumn Annals"), the Lunyu 論語 ("The Discourses") and the Xiaojing 孝經 ("The Book of Filial Piety") I have used the Old Text editions. That which I do not know I have omitted.

Annotated translation by Göran Malmqvist