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<i>Student Name:</i> Xixi Xing (1824 words)	
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Tracing *ning* 佞: From Graph Evolution to Small Seal-script Formation Principle

1. Introduction

Chinese, as a semantic-phonetic language system, encodes both meaning (*yi* 義) and sound (*yin* 音) within the visual structure (*xing* 形) of its characters, making their written form linguistically and culturally significant.¹ However, while scholars from pre-imperial China to the twenty-first century have thoroughly examined the semantic and phonetic dimensions of the Confucian-ideologically significant character *ning* 佞 (rhetorical excellence, eloquence, or flattery),² academic research has largely neglected the analysis of its visual form.³

This essay addresses the research gap through a focused examination of *ning*'s visual form with two principal approaches. Section two conducts a diachronic reconstruction of the character's graphical evolution from its earliest documented occurrences to the Eastern Han (27–220 CE) dynasty. Section three undertakes a critical reappraisal of two major existing character formation principles (*liushu* 六書) pertaining to *ning*'s small seal-script formation to prove an optimised interpretation.

¹ Lin Yin 林尹, *Wenzi xue gaishuo* 文字學概說 (Xinbei: Zhongzheng shuju, 2007), p. 209.

² Confucius contributed the semantic diversion of *ning*, from a positive sense of rhetorical excellence and eloquence to the negative sense of treacherous and flattery. During the time of Confucius, there was a social climate that treasure eloquence (*shangning* 尚佞) in this era (See *Analepts* 5.5. When someone said Zhong Gong 仲弓 (b. 522 BCE) is humane but lack of eloquence, Confucius replied by emphasis the unworthy of pursuit eloquence). Confucius is the opponent of this phenomenon, exemplified in the *Analepts*, which uniformly presents eloquence as incompatible with moral cultivation, framing *ning* as an impediment to achieving humanity (*ren* 仁) (See, *Analepts* 6.16, 11.25, 14.32, 15.11, and 16.4). This philosophical stance precipitated *ning*'s semantic pejoration, stripping the term of its earlier positive associations and establishing its modern negative sense.

In this essay, the book and chapter numbers of the *Analepts* are referenced from Watson, 2007. Burton Watson, *The Analects of Confucius* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

The first two translations of *ning* are based on the interpretation of *Collated and Finalised Explaining Simple Graphs and Analysing Compound Characters* (*shuowen jiezi daxu ben* 說文解字大徐本). Original text: 「佞，巧調高材也。」 Xu Shen 許慎, annotate. Duan Yucai 段玉裁, *Xintian guyin shuowen jiezi zhu* 新添古音說文解字註 (Taipei: Hongye wenhua, 1999), p. 628.

³ The sole existing study addressing *ning* is Zhang Desu's 張德蘇 work. While Zhang provides valuable analysis of the character's semantic and phonological aspects, his research exhibits two significant limitations. First, it neglects systematic examination of *ning*'s graphic evolution; second, it fails to incorporate critical evidence from excavated artifacts that could substantiate *ning*'s evolution. Zhang Desu 張德蘇, 'Ren yu ning guanxi kaobian: jiantan yuanshi ren guannian neihan de fazhan bianhua' 仁與佞關係考辨：兼探原始仁觀念內涵的發展變化, *Dezhou xueyuan xuebao* 德州學院學報, 5 (2022), 1–6.

2. The Diachronic Evolution of Ning's Visual Form

While the complete historical development of *ning*'s form remains partially obscured due to limited extant materials, the key stages of its graphical evolution can be reliably traced.⁴ The available evidence indicates that *ning* first emerged as an independent character during the Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE) when the First Emperor of Qin (259–210 BCE) standardised written script. This permits a division of *ning*'s formulation development into two principal phases: the pre-Qin era, predominantly the Warring States period (403–221 BCE), and the post-Qin era, focusing on the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE).

During the Warring States period, *ning* exhibited two significant formation characteristics. The first characteristic is that *ning* consistently appeared through the borrowed form of *nian* 年 (ripe, year) to express its meaning of rhetorical excellence (Figure 1).



Figure 1. *Ning* represents in *nian*'s form. ('Jinteng' 金滕 chapter in Tsinghua Warring States bamboo slips 清華簡.)

This feature is clearly demonstrated in three sets of Warring States bamboo slips dating from 335 BCE to the late third century BCE.⁵ A thorough examination shows that the graph for *ning* occurs ten times throughout these manuscripts, consistently employing the written form of *nian* without exception.⁶ This systematic use of character borrowing (*jiajie* 假借) finds its justification in the similar Old Chinese pronunciation shared by *ning* and *nian*.⁷ While the

⁴ Please reference Appendix One for the evolution route of *ning*'s form and all related graphics mentioned in this essay.

⁵ Three sets of Warring States bamboo slips include: Tsinghua bamboo slips 清華簡, Shanghai Museum bamboo slips 上博簡, and Shuihudi bamboo slips 睡虎地簡.

Scanned version of Tsinghua and Shanghai Museum bamboo slips are accessed via Guyin xiaojing 古音小鏡 website. Guyin xiaojing 古音小鏡, *Chujian zixingku gongcheng ban* 楚簡字形庫工程版 <<http://www.kaom.net/jienc.php>> (2022) [accessed 6 May 2025].

Shuihudi qinmu zhujian zhengli xiaozu 睡虎地秦墓竹簡整理小組, comp., *Shuihudi qinmu zhujian* 睡虎地秦墓竹簡 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1990).

⁶ Please reference to the Appendix Two for the original records of these ten occurrences of *ning*, as well as the name and chapters of bamboo slips.

⁷ Based on Li Fanggui's 李方桂 reconstruction of Old Chinese pronunciation, *nian* pronounced as [nin] while *ning* pronounced as [niŋh]. The initial and main vowel of these two characters is same, the only minor distinct remains in the ending of final.

Shanghai Museum bamboo slips employ graphs besides the general *nian*'s form to represent *ning*, such as 𠂔 and 𠂕, these variants represent either abbreviated forms or variations of *nian* rather than constituting independent representations of *ning*.⁸ Therefore, these graphs do not undermine the established pattern of *nian* serving as the exclusive vehicle for writing *ning* during this period.⁹

The second characteristic is that this period marks the first attempts to develop distinct graphic forms for *ning*, as evidenced by transmitted ancient characters (*chuanchao guwenzi* 傳抄古文字), which provide fragmentary but crucial evidence of its early independent development.¹⁰ Analysis of these transmitted characters reveals two principal graphic categories that illuminate this transitional phase (Figure 2).

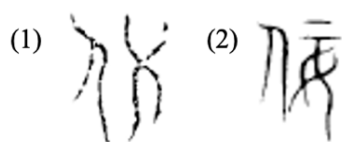


Figure 2. Two graphic categories of transmitted ancient characters.

Xiao xuetang 小學堂, *Hanzi gujin yin ziliao ku* 漢字古今音資料庫 <<https://xiaoxue.iis.sinica.edu.tw>> (2011) [accessed 6 May 2025].

⁸ Bai Yulan 白於藍, *Jianbo gushu tongjiazhi daxi* 簡帛古書通假字大系 (Fuzhou: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 2017), p. 1291, 1310. The interpretation for employ abbreviated and variant form of *nian* to convey *ning*'s meaning adopted from Li Ling 李零, 2007 and Chen Jian 陳劍, 2008.

Li Ling 李零, *Shangbo zhujian sanpian jiaodu ji* 上博竹簡三篇校讀記 (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2007), p. 25, 27.

Fudan daxue chutu wenxian yu guwenzi yanjiu zhongxin 復旦大學出土文獻與古文字研究中心, *Chenjian: shangbo liu kongzi jian jihuanzi chongbian xinyi* 陳劍：上博六孔子見季桓子重編新譯 <<http://www.fdgwz.org.cn/Web/Show/383>> (2008) [accessed 10 May 2025].

⁹ The phenomenon of *ning* appears in the borrowed form of *nian* also finds corroboration in classical texts during the Warring States period. The *Zuo Tradition of Spring and Autumn Annals* (*chunqiu zuoshi zhuan* 春秋左氏傳), in its account of Lord Xiang's 襄公 30th year, records an instance where “the King of Zhou killed his younger brother Ning Fu.” (「天王殺其弟佞夫。」) Significantly, the parallel passage in the *Gongyang Tradition* (*chunqiu gongyang zhuan* 春秋公羊傳) renders the same name as “Nian Fu” (年夫).

Further documentation appears in the *Elder Dai's Records of Ritual* (*dadai liji* 大戴禮記), “Gongguan” (公冠) chapter, which advises rulers to “draw near to the common people and treat them as own children, while keeping distance from treacherous elements.” (「使王近于民，視民如子，遠于佞。」) Notably, the *Gardens of Eloquence* (*shuoyuan* 說苑) preserves this passage with *nian* written as *ning* (「使王近于民，遠于佞。」).

Ruan Yuan 阮元, ed., *Shisanjing zhushu: Zuozhuan* 十三經註疏左傳 (Taipei: Yiwen yinshuguan, 2001), p. 679.

Ruan Yuan 阮元, ed., *Shisanjing zhushu: Gongyang guliang* 十三經註疏公羊穀梁 (Taipei: Yiwen yinshuguan, 2001), p. 268.

Dai De 戴德, *Dadai liji* 大戴禮記 in *Wenyuange siku quanshu* 文淵閣四庫全書, vol. 128 (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 2013), p. 530.

Liu Xiang 劉向, *Shuo yuan* 說苑 in *Wenyuange siku quanshu* 文淵閣四庫全書, vol. 696 (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 2013), p. 168.

¹⁰ Xu Zaiguo 徐在國, comp., *Chuanchao guwenzi bian* 傳抄古文字編 (Beijing: Xianzhuang shuju, 2006), p. 1250.

The first category presents an adapted version of the Warring States' *nian* structure, modifying its initial vertical composition, which depicts a person carrying crops, into a horizontal configuration, where a person occupies the left position while a simplified crop symbol appears on the right. The second category is remarkably similar to the eventual Qin small seal-script. These two categories may represent sequential developmental stages, with the modified *nian* structure experiencing a process of graphic corruption, leading to the emergence of the small seal-script version. These transmitted ancient characters offer vital conceptual links, though discontinuous documentation prevents definitive reconstruction of *ning*'s graphic evolution during this transformative period.

After the First Emperor of Qin abolished the written forms of the other six states and standardised the small seal-script, this newly emerged graphic form of *ning* underwent a period of rejection and gradual acceptance. Despite this standardisation, manuscripts from two Han tombs suggests that early Western Han scribes still tended to use the form of *nian* to represent the meaning of *ning*.¹¹ This is supported by the fact that the four surviving occurrences of *ning* in Han manuscripts all retain the clerical-script modified form of *nian* rather than the standardised small seal form.¹² This phenomenon allows a hypothesis that, given both the graphic continuity of established forms and the incomplete adoption of newly created character during this period, Han scribes preferred the older, borrowed form of *nian* when expressing the meaning of *ning*. These Han manuscripts further serve as supplementary evidence that the *ning-nian* borrowing relationship was not merely an isolated case lacking corroboration, but rather a long-standing practice that persisted from the Warring States period.¹³

¹¹ The Han tomb manuscripts employ *nian*'s form to represent *ning* are 'Shiliu jing chengfa' 十六經成法 in Mawangdui Han tomb silk manuscripts 馬王堆漢墓帛文 and 'Xianwen' 憲問 and 'Jishi' 季氏 in Dingzhou Han tomb bamboo slips 定州漢墓竹簡.

Qiu Xigui 裘錫圭, comp., *Changsha Mawangdui hanmu jianbo jicheng* 長沙馬王堆漢墓簡帛集成, vol. 1 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2014), p. 135.

Qiu Xigui 裘錫圭, comp., *Changsha Mawangdui hanmu jianbo jicheng* 長沙馬王堆漢墓簡帛集成, vol. 4 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2014), p. 165.

Dingzhou hanmu zhujian zhengli xiaozu 定州漢墓竹簡整理小組, comp., *Dingzhou hanmu zhujian lunyu* 定州漢墓竹簡論語 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1997), p. 66, 69, 78, 80.

¹² Clerical script is the character style dominantly used in the Han dynasty, which first invented in the Qin dynasty by jail officials just after the standardised small seal script.

Original text: 「是時，秦燒滅經書，滌除舊典。大發吏卒，興戍役。官獄職務繁，初有隸書，以趣約易，而古文由此絕矣。」 Xu Shen, *Xintian guyin shuowen jiezi zhu*, p. 765.

¹³ This statement further corroborated by Chen Jian 陳劍, 2008. Chen observed the prolonged retention of *nian*'s graphic form for representing *ning* across all examined Qin and Han excavated texts, demonstrating *ning*'s delayed graphic stabilisation. Original text: 「『佞』字的通行是比較晚的事情，所以秦漢出土文獻中用來表

However, by the Eastern Han dynasty, as seen in stone inscriptions, after the small seal-script form of *nian* underwent clerical change (*libian* 隸變),¹⁴ the clerical script of *ning* was eventually adopted by the populace. This shift solidified its acceptance as the standard representation of *ning*, and this graphic form has been adopted until modern times.

3. Reassessment of Ning's Small Seal-Script Formation Principle

Having reconstructed the graphic evolution of *ning*, this section reassesses Xu Xuan's 徐鉉 (916–991) and Xu Kai's 徐鉉 (920–974) competing theories on *ning*'s small seal-script formation, identifying the most reliable interpretation for its character formation.

Xu Xuan's *Collated and Finalised Explaining Simple Graphs and Analysing Compound Characters* (*shuowen jiezi daxu ben* 說文解字大徐本)¹⁵ categorises *ning* as an abbreviated compound character, composed of *nü* 女 (women) and an abbreviated *xin* 信 (trustworthiness).¹⁶ Although it can be counted as an acceptable interpretation, this analysis proves problematic on philological grounds due to two deficiencies. First, the “abbreviated *xin*” explanation is an isolated analytical category within the *Shuowen*'s hermeneutic system, being uniquely applied to *ning*. Moreover, systematic comparison with character dictionaries before the late Tang yields no similar formation principle for *ning*.¹⁷ Such terminological isolation suggests Xu Xuan's interpretation may reflect a provisional heuristic for resolving an otherwise opaque character, rather than an empirically grounded conclusion.

示『佞』這個詞的字都是『年』。』 Fudan daxue chutu wenxian yu guwenzi yanjiu zhongxin, *Chenjian: shangbo liu kongzi jian jihuanzi chongbian xinyi*, 2008.

¹⁴ Clerical change is the transformation process from the small seal-script to the clerical script, which is the most important transitional phrase in ancient and modern writing script. The main feature of the clerical change is turned the small seal-scripts into stroke-based and line-based characters.

¹⁵ Later, referred as *Shuowen*.

¹⁶ Original text: 「从女，信省。」 Xu Shen 許慎, 'Shuowen shier xia' 說文十二下 in *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 (Guangzhou: Chenchang zhisheng zhai, 1873), pp. 1–26 (p. 10).

¹⁷ Two dictionaries before the late Tang, *Wujing wenzi* 五經文字 and *Yiqie jing yinyi* 一切經音義, interpreted *ning* is composed by *ren*, instead of composed by abbreviated *xin*.

Original text: 「佞，乃定反，從仁。」 Zhang Can 張參, *Wujing wenzi* 五經文字 in *Wenyuange siku quanshu* 文淵閣四庫全書, vol. 224 (Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, 2013), p. 284.

Original text: 「佞，諂媚也。說文：巧媚高材曰佞。又偽善曰佞，字從女從仁。」 Xu Shiyi 徐時儀, *Yiqie jing yinyi sanzong jiaoben hekan* 一切經音義三種校本合刊 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2012), p. 495.

Second, the abbreviated compound character principle systematically requires one complete character combined with one abbreviated component that cannot stand alone as an independent character.¹⁸ The issue arises as the supposedly abbreviated component *xin*, is itself a complete character recorded in *Shuowen*, which is *ren* 仁 (humanity). This means the formation of *ning* would effectively contain two complete characters (*nü* and *ren*), violating the fundamental of abbreviate compound characters. This methodological inconsistency in applying the formation principle casts doubt on the classification's validity.

Instead, Xu Kai proposed that *ning* is a semantic-phonetic comprised of *nü* with *ren* as the phonetic in his *Filiation of and Commentary on the Explaining Simple Graphs and Analysing Compound Characters* (*shuowen jiezi xizhuan* 說文解字系傳).¹⁹ Given that *ren* and *ning* exhibit distinct pronunciation in Middle Chinese, many scholars have questioned whether *ren* could truly function as the phonetic element for *ning*. However, the following reconstruction of Old Chinese reveals their shared or highly similar pronunciation, supporting Xu Kai's analysis.

The reconstruction included two components of pronunciation, initial and final. First, the initial. According to the *Guangyun* 廣韻 rhyme dictionary, in Middle Chinese *ren* was classified under the *ri* 日 initial ([n-]), while *ning* belonged to the *ni* 泥 initial ([ŋ-]).²⁰ Despite this distinction, Zhang Taiyan's 章太炎 (1869–1936) “*niang* and *ri* initials merged into *ni* initials” theory (*niang ri gui ni shuo* 娘日歸泥說) provides critical evidence that *ren* and *ning*'s initials were homogeneous in Old Chinese.²¹ Zhang argued that the *niang*, *ri*, and *ni* initials in Middle Chinese were all pronounced as [n-] in Old Chinese. Due to divergent phonetic developments influenced by medial, these initials later split into separate categories in Middle Chinese, with only the *ni* initial retaining the original Old Chinese pronunciation.²²

¹⁸ Lin Yin, *Wenzi xue gaishuo*, p. 130.

¹⁹ Original text: 「從女，仁聲。」 Xu Kai 徐鍇, *Shuowen jiezi xizhuan* 說文解字系傳 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986), p. 244.

²⁰ Xiao xuetang, *Hanzi gujin yin ziliao ku*, 2011.

International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) indication referenced from Zhu, 2019. Zhu Jianing 竺家寧, *Shengyun xue shengyun zhiliu* 聲韻學聲韻之旅 (Taipei: Wunan tushu chubun gufen youxian gongsi, 2019), p. 110.

²¹ Zhang Taiyan 章太炎, ‘Guyin niang ri erniu gui ni shuo’ 古音娘日二紐歸泥說, in *Guogu lunheng* 國故論衡 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshu guan, 2010), pp. 40–43.

²² The Old Chinese initial [n-] underwent systematic differentiation in Middle Chinese, conditioned by specific medial environments. When followed by a medial [r], the original [n-] developed into the retroflex nasal [ŋ-], corresponding to the Middle Chinese *niang* initial (n+r>ŋ-). In cases where the medial [j] was present, it derived into [nz-], reflected in the Middle Chinese *ri* initial (n+j>nz). Where neither medial [r] nor [j] occurred, the original alveolar nasal [n-] was preserved as the Middle Chinese *ni* initial ([n-]). Zhu Jianing, *Shengyun xue shengyun zhiliu*, p. 298–99.

Therefore, in Old Chinese, both *ren* and *ning* would have shared the same initial consonant, reconstructed as [n-].

Second, the final. One of the most reliable methods for reconstructing Old Chinese finals is through rhyme analysis in classical texts. Evidence from the *Discourses of the States* (*guoyu* 國語) and the *Book of Odes* (*shijing* 詩經) confirms that *ren* and *ning* rhymed in Old Chinese. In the ‘Jin Discourse’ (*jinyu* 晉語) of the *Discourses of the States*, the character *ning* rhymes with *tian* 田.²³ Furthermore, in the *Book of Odes*, the poem ‘Shuyu tian’ (叔于田) pairs *tian* with *ren* in rhyme.²⁴ This rhyme chain (*tian* with *ning*, *tian* with *ren*) strongly suggests that *ning* and *ren* shared the same final in Old Chinese, classified by scholars under the *zhen* 真 rhyme group.²⁵

Further supporting this argument is Li Fanggui’s 李方桂 (1902–1987) Old Chinese reconstruction. According to Li, *ren* ([njin]) and *ning* ([niŋh]) share identical initial and main vowel, differing only in medial and ending variations, confirming their phonetic compatibility.²⁶ Through initial consonant analysis, rhyme evidence, and phonological reconstruction, it is evident that *ren* and *ning* were phonetically similar in Old Chinese. Therefore, Xu Kai’s assertion that *ren* serves as the phonetic component in *ning* is phonologically justified, reinforcing the reliability of his character formation principle.

The comparative examination of the two Xu’s interpretations reveals their fundamental disagreement concerning whether *ren* qualifies as a phonetic component. Xu Xuan maintains that *ren* cannot serve this phonetic function, thereby rejecting the semantic-phonetic classification. Three formation principles remain: pictograph, ideograph, and associative compound. Apparently, the small seal-script form of *ning* exhibits neither the pictorial

²³ Original text: 「佞之見佞，果喪其田。」

Guyin xiaojing 古音小鏡, *Xianqin yun xilian chaxun* 先秦韻系聯查詢 <http://www.kaom.net/yayuns_net.php> (2024) [accessed 11 May 2025].

²⁴ Original texts: 「叔于田，巷無居人。豈無居人，不如叔也，洵美且仁。」 Guyin xiaojing, *Xianqin yun xilian chaxun*, 2024.

²⁵ Scholar who categorised *ning* under the rhyme group of *zhen* is Jiang Yougao 江有誥, 1994. *Ren*’s categorisation of *zhen* rhyme group was alleged by Wang Li 王力, 2012.

Jiang Yougao 江有誥, *Xianqin yundu* 先秦韻讀 (Shanxi: Weinan yanshi jiaokan, 1994), p. 2.

Wang Li 王力, *Shijing yundu chuci yundu* 詩經韻讀楚辭韻讀 (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2012), p. 175.

²⁶ Xiao xuetang, *Hanzi gujin yin ziliao ku*, 2011.

The same Old Chinese pronunciation of *ren* and *ning* was also observed by Zhang Taiyan, when he alleged the theory of “*niang* and *ri* initials merged into *ni* initials”. Original text: 「『人』、『仁』之聲，今在日紐。『人』之聲年，爲奴顛切；『仁』之聲佞，爲乃定切。此則『人』、『仁』本音如佞，在泥紐也。」

Zhang Taiyan, ‘Guyin niang ri erniu gui ni shuo’, p. 42.

representation characteristic of pictographs nor the abstract symbolic markings indicative of ideographs. While associative compounds derive meaning from the combination of their constituent elements,²⁷ the pairing of woman (*nü*) and humanity (*ren*) fails to produce a logical connection to *ning*'s meaning of "flattery". Therefore, the only solution for Xu Xuan is to propose *ning* as an abbreviated associative compound, providing a seemingly acceptable interpretation by incorporating woman (*nü*) and trustworthiness (*xin*): "a woman's trustworthiness borders on flattery".²⁸ As the above examination proves it unsatisfactory, the semantic-phonetic construction proposed by Xu Kai remains as the only viable alternative. The phonological correspondence of *ren* and *ning* strongly validates *ren*'s function as a phonetic marker, thereby finally confirming *ning*'s small seal-script form as a semantic-phonetic character.

A crucial distinction must be made regarding the scope of this conclusion. It applies specifically to the small seal-script form of *ning* and should not be construed as evidence that the character originally adopted semantic-phonetic construction during its formative stages.

4. Conclusion

While constrained by limited epigraphic evidence, this study systematically reconstructs *ning*'s graphic evolution, conclusively confirming its semantic-phonetic structure in small seal-script.

As philosopher Pang Pu 龐樸 (1928–2015) observed, philology's microscopic analysis can reveal macroscopic truths.²⁹ This case study yields three significant insights about Chinese character evolution. First, the *ning-nian* graphic borrowing exemplifies phonetic primacy in early character formation, where sound always emerged prior to the graphic.³⁰ Second, the character formation process of *ning* reveals scribal conventions often outweighed systematic principles in character evolution. Third, the gradual Han dynasty adoption of standardised form illustrates the inherent conservatism of writing systems, indicating graphic changes

²⁷ Definition of pictograph, ideograph, and associative compound adopted from Lin, 2007. Lin Yin, *Wenzi xue gaishuo*, p. 64, 90, 112.

²⁸ Original text: 「女子之信近於佞也。」 Xu Shen, 'Shuowen shier xia', p. 10.

²⁹ Pang Pu 龐樸, 'Ren zi yidian' 仁字臆斷, *Xun gen* 尋根, 1 (2001), 4–8 (p. 8).

³⁰ According to Lin, 2007, Chinese characters typically developed through meaning, sound, and form progression, with graphic representation emerging after sound. Lin Yin, *Wenzi xue gaishuo*, p. 21.

require a gradual acceptance instead of an overnight change. Furthermore, a critical reassessment of the two Xu's competing theories underscores the fundamental role of phonology in character analysis and the necessity of challenging established interpretations when evidence warrants, even when such conclusions challenge prevailing academic consensus.

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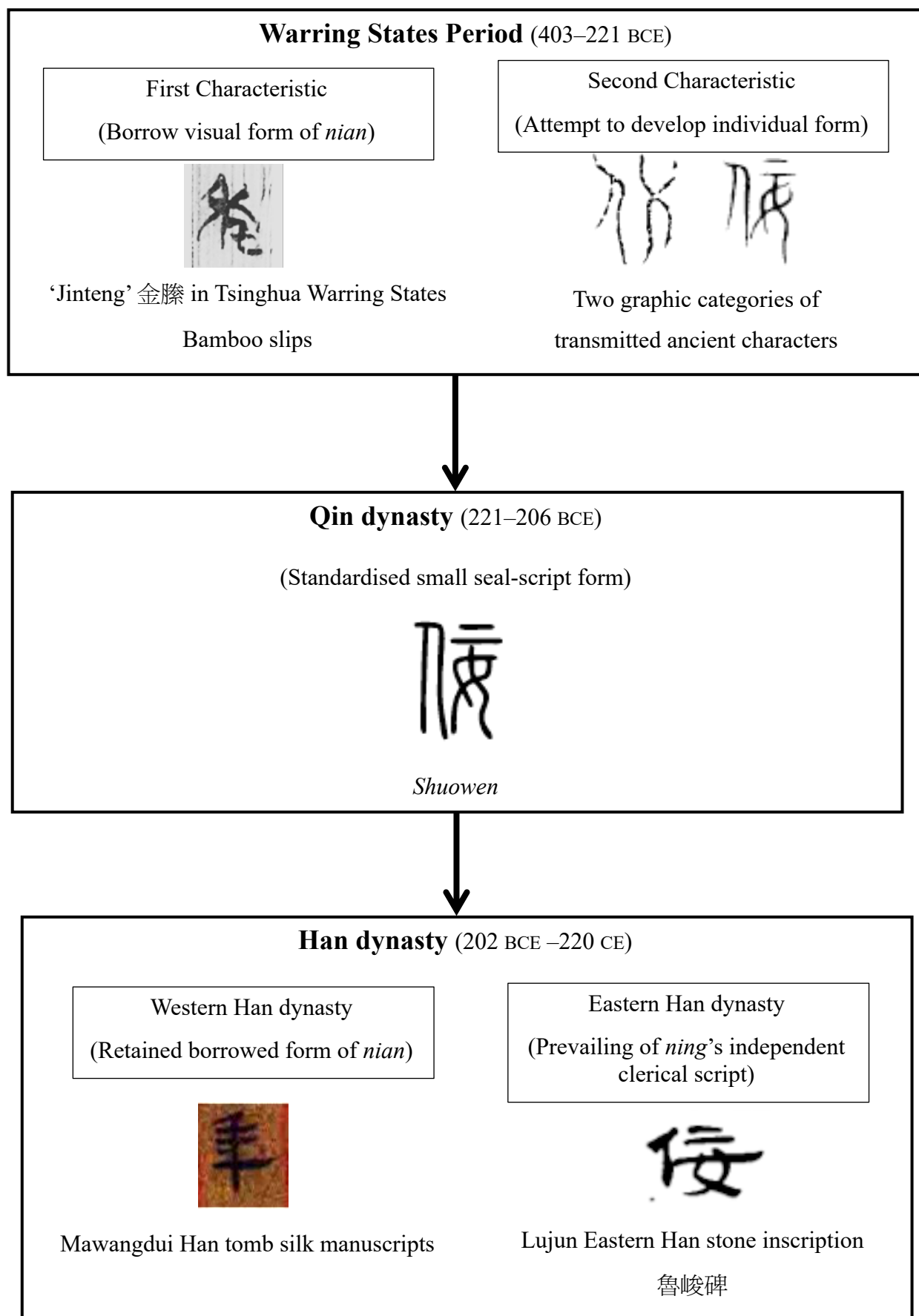
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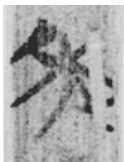
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Appendix One: Form evolution of *ning* and related graphics



Appendix Two: Occurrences of *ning* in the Warring States Bamboo Slips

Number	Name of Bamboo Slips	Chapter Name	Related Sentences ³¹	Page and bamboo slip number ³²	Original form records
1	Tsing Hua Bamboo slips 清華簡	Jin teng 金滕	是年（佞）若巧能。	01F/ 04	
2		Guan zhong 管仲	好使年（佞）人而不信 貞良。	06B/ 23	
3			夫年（佞）有利氣。	06B/ 23	
4			今夫年（佞）者之利氣 亦可得而聞乎。	06B/ 24	
5			既年（佞）又仁。	06B/ 24	
6			夫年（佞）者之事君。	06B/ 25	
7	Shanghai Museum Bamboo slips 上博簡	Lan fu 蘭賦	年（佞）前其約儉。	8H/ 04	

³¹ To maintain consistency and enhance readability, the related sentences only indicate the character borrowing between *nian* and *ning*. Other instances of character borrowing in the above cited texts have been deliberately omitted to preserve analytical focus.

³² The page and bamboo slips number in this column all referenced from Guyin xiaojing website, excepting instance 10 of the Shuihudi Bamboo slip is referenced from Shuihudi qinmu zhujian zhengli xiaozu 睡虎地秦墓竹簡整理小組, 1990.

Guyin xiaojing, *Chujian zixingku gongcheng ban*, 2022.

8		Kongzi shilun 孔子詩論	少有𢇛（佞）安。	1A/ 08	
9		Jihuanzi jian kongzi 季桓子見孔子	斯不迂（佞）。	6B/ 22	
10	Shuihudi bamboo slips 睡虎地簡	Rishu yizhong, Chu chu 日書乙種·楚 除	生子，年（佞）。不可 遠行，遠行不返。	p. 120/ 22	