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An Analysis of the Explanation for *wǔ* (武 martial) in the *Shuowen*

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A Chinese idiom:

“To stop branding axes is the essence of martial virtue (*zhige weiwu* 止戈為武)”



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1. A brief introduction to the *Explaining Simple Graphs and Analysing Compound Characters* (*shuowen jiezi* 說文解字)

- **1.1 Background**

The Han's imperial disregard for primary learning (*xiaoxue* 小學) and its focus on literature in official examinations led to contemporaries' neglect of primary learning's significance. Ultimately, they will misunderstand and be unable to inherit the wisdom embedded in the classics.

- **1.2 Purpose**

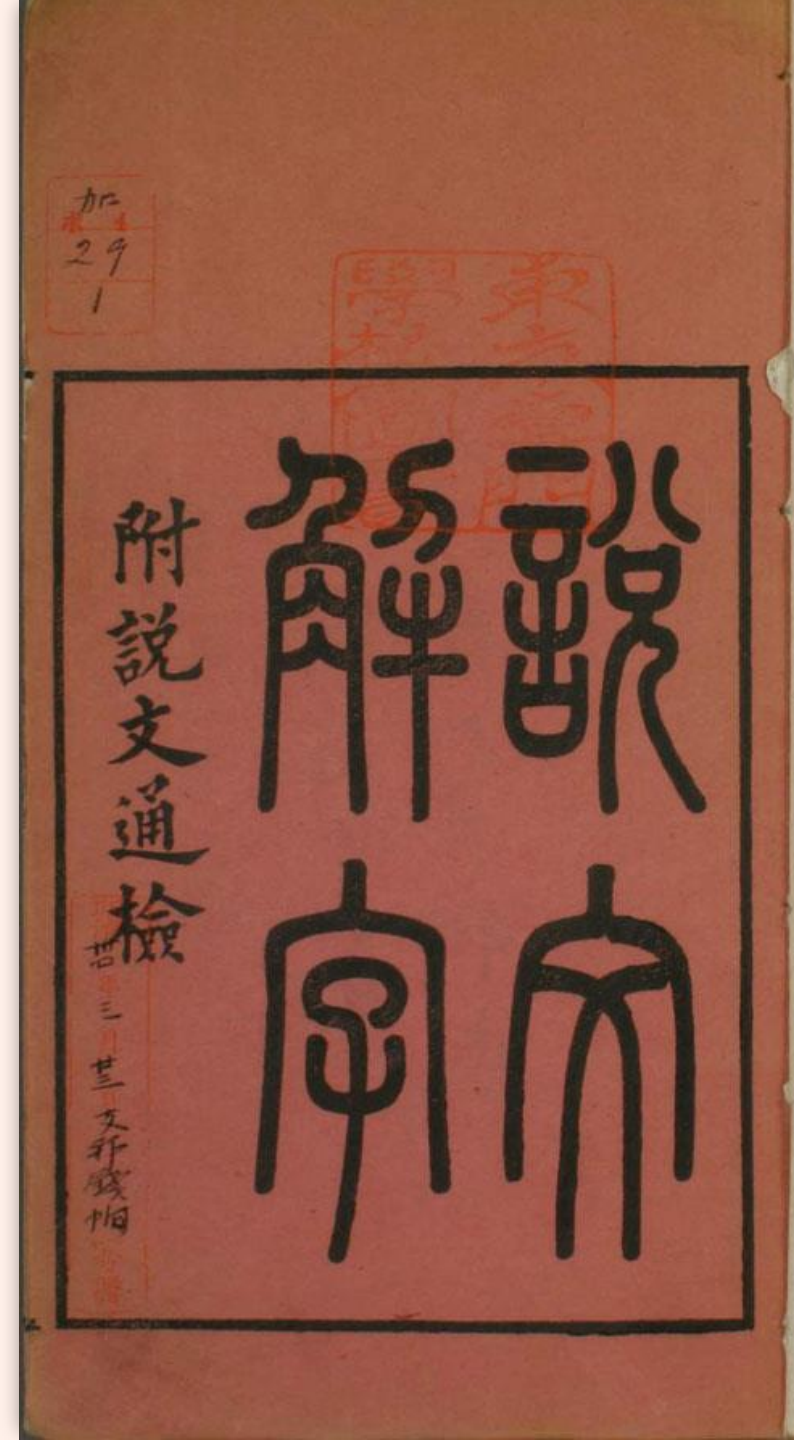
Illustrate principles of all creatures via their character, correct mistakes in character interpretation, enabling scholars to grasp their form, sound, and meaning thoroughly.

1.3 Materials

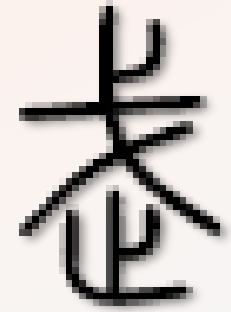
- Ancient Characters: small seal script, Zhou script
- Scholar Opinion: 35 eminent scholars
- Book Reference: 36 classics and documents

1.4 Methodology

- Six character formation principles
- Divide 9353 characters into 540 radical categories
- Clarify by example when the meaning is obscure
- Say with evidence, leave any uncertainty



2. Analyse the *Shuowen*'s explanation



2.1 The *Shuowen*'s explanation of *wu*

- *Meaning*

“King Zhuang of Chu said, ‘As for military power, it is to establish achievements and lay aside arms. Therefore, to stop brandishing axes is the meaning of *wu*.’”

(「楚莊王曰：『夫武，定功戢兵，故止戈爲武。』」)

- *Character construction*

As for associative compound character, paralleling simple graphs to forge a new character, then to comprehend the new meaning, *wu* and *xin* (trustworthiness 信) are examples of this.

(「會意者，比類合誼，以見指撝，『武』、『信』是也。」)



Three questions:

- 1) Who is King Zhuang of Chu?
- 2) Under what circumstances did he assert this explanation?
- 3) Why did Xu Shen adopt his words to explain *wu*?



2.2 Introduction of King Zhuang of Chu

- **Name:** Xiong Mi 熊羆
- **Reign:** 613–591 BCE, the 22nd King of the Chu State
- **Achievements:**
 - One of the “Five Hegemons (*wuba* 五霸)” in the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BCE)
 - To do nothing or to amaze people with a single soar (*buming zeyi yiming jingren* 不鳴則已一鳴驚人)

2.3 The Battle of Bi (*bi zhi zhan* 邲之戰)

- **Time:** 597 BCE
- **Venue:** Bi County in the Zheng 鄭 State
- **Main protagonists:** King Zhuang of Chu 楚莊王 (r. 613–591 BCE), Duke Jing of Jin 晉景公 (r. 599–581 BCE), and commanders of both states.



- **Reason:** Jin and Chu states were competing for hegemony in the central plain.
- **Outcomes:** Chu defeated the Jin. King Chu became the new hegemon in the central plain.



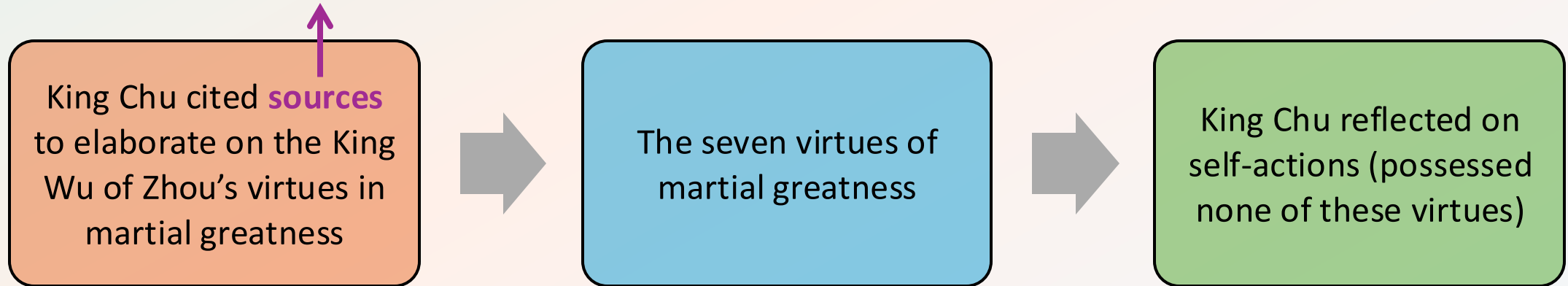
2.4 A discussion between King Chu and his general

- **Construction of a military monument for commemoration**

“My lord, why do you not build a military monument by collecting Jin corpses? I have heard that the conquest of our enemies must be displayed for our descendants, so that they will not forget our martial achievement.”



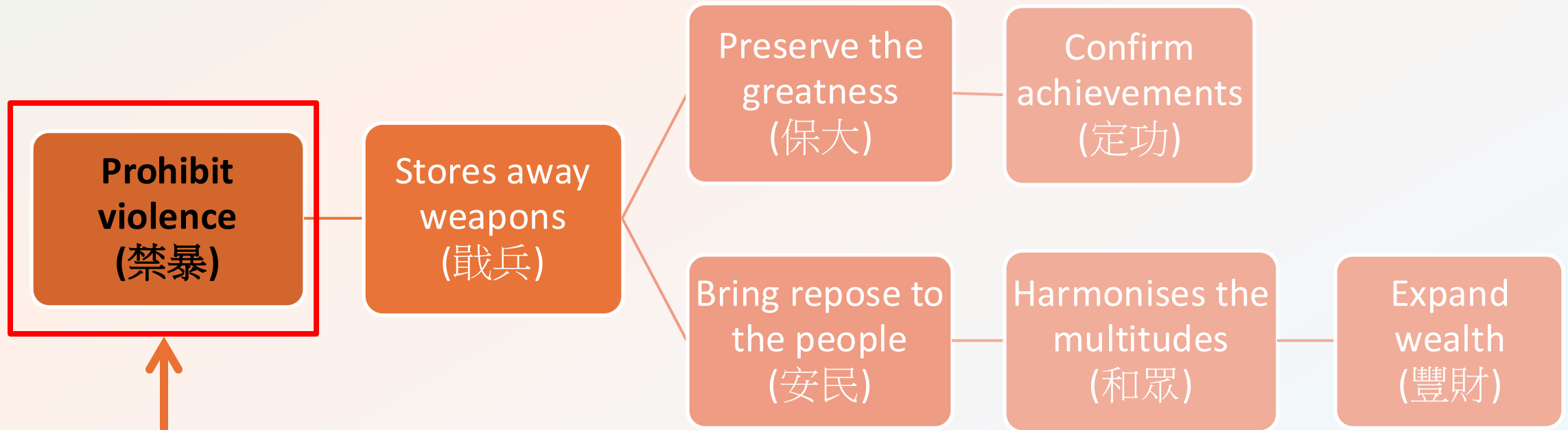
1. The graphic form of *wu*
2. Four lines in the *Book of Odes* (*shijing* 詩經)



Examples:

1	“stop” and “dagger-axe” form “martial” (止戈為武)	Prohibit violence (禁暴)	Now I have caused two domains to lay bare the bones of their soldiers—that was violence. (今我使二國暴骨，暴矣。)
2	Bring peace to the myriad domains (綏萬邦)	Harmonises the multitudes (和眾)	Lacking virtue and striving by force for the princes’ allegiance, how I harmonise the multitudes. (無德而強爭諸侯，何以和眾。)

Seven virtues of martial greatness



Illustrated by the
graphic form of *wu*.

The end of the Battle
of Bi

A discussion of military
monument construction

The foundation virtue of
seven martial greatness



2.5 Xu Shen's adoption of King Chu's words

- ***Say with evidence, leave the uncertainty***

- 1) I have extensively selected glosses from authoritative scholars, both minor and greater, and they are believable and verifiable. These were employed to investigate the origin and development of characters.
(「博采通人，至於小大，信而有證，稽譌其說。」)
- 2) Where there is something that is not known, I leave the matter open.
(「其於所不知，蓋闕如也。」)

- ***Chu Bamboo Slips of Tsing Hua University (370 BCE)***

227 years after the Battle of Bi.



3. Comparison of the original meaning and the *Shuowen*'s explanation

3.1 Original meaning of *wu*

Orthograph: *wu* was composed by walking radical (*xing* 行), an axe (*ge* 戈), and a foot (*zhi* 止).

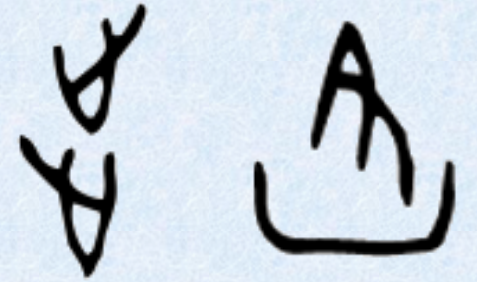
Meaning: This orthography depicts a soldier holding an axe, walking on a road to fight bravely.



3.2 Main difference: the meaning of *zhi* 止 (stop vs. foot)

1) *zhi means stop*

Shuowen: **to stop** brandishing axes is the meaning of *wu*



(Figure one) (Figure two)

2) *zhi means foot*

- **Evidence one: Characters contain *zhi* in the oracle bone inscription.**
 - “walking slowly” (*bu* 步) consists of two mirrored *zhi* graphs, depicting **right feet** positioned in front of the **left feet**. (Figure one)
 - “arrive” (*ge* 各) combines **a foot** oriented toward a dwelling, conveying the image of someone reaching a destination. (Figure two)

- **Evidence two: *zhi* in the received literature text.**

- *‘Treatise on Criminal Law’* in the *Book of Han*: “Those who should have their **left foot** amputated are instead to receive five hundred lashes; those who should have their **right foot** amputated [...] are all to be executed in the market.”

(《漢書·刑法志》：「當斬**左止**者，笞五百；當斬**右止**，……皆棄市。」)

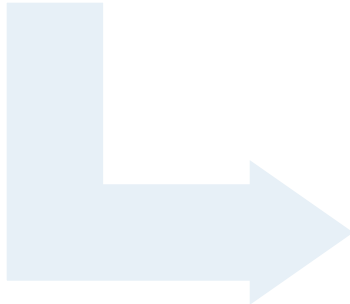
Original meaning

- *wu*: action of fighting
- *zhi*: depicts a foot, means to walk



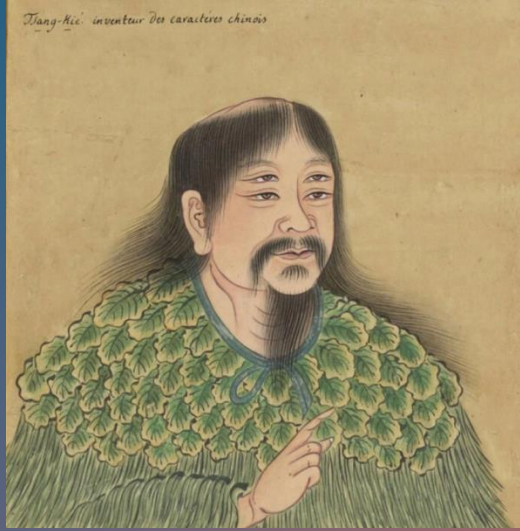
Spring and Autumn period

- *zhi*: meaning shifted from walk to stop
- *wu*: King Chu interprets *wu*'s graphic form as “stop weapons”



Eastern Han dynasty

- Xu Shen's conservative compiling method adopts King Chu's interpretation



4. Conclusion

- 1) The explanation of *wu* in the *Shuowen*
- 2) Evolution of *wu*'s meaning across time.
- 3) Each Chinese character embeds the wisdom of our ancestors, from the initial creators to later interpreters.

**THANK YOU FOR
LISTENING**



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Appendix One

Original texts of the discussion on military monument construction

丙辰，楚重至於邲，遂次于衡雍。

潘黨曰：「君盍築武軍，而收晉尸以為京觀。臣聞克敵必示子孫，以無忘武功。」

楚子曰：「非爾所知也。夫文，止戈為武。武王克商。作《頌》曰：『載戢干戈，載橐弓矢。我求懿德，肆于時夏，允王保之。』又作《武》，其卒章曰『耆定爾功』。其三曰：『鋪時繹思，我徂求定。』其六曰：『綏萬邦，屢豐年。』夫武，禁暴、戢兵、保大、定功、安民、和眾、豐財者也。故使子孫無忘其章。今我使二國暴骨，暴矣；觀兵以威諸侯，兵不戢矣。暴而不戢，安能保大？猶有晉在，焉得定功？所違民欲猶多，民何安焉？無德而強爭諸侯，何以和眾？利人之幾，而安人之亂，以為己榮，何以豐財？武有七德，我無一焉，何以示子孫？其為先君宮，告成事而已。武非吾功也。古者明王伐不敬，取其鯨鯢而封之，以為大戮，於是乎有京觀，以懲淫慝。今罪無所，而民皆盡忠以死君命，又可以為京觀乎？」

祀于河，作先君宮，告成事而還。(Lord Xuan 12.2; 宣公十二年)