Revisiting the *wén* 文 and the *zì* 字: The Great Chinese Characters Hoax

by

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Recent discoveries of ancient bone, bronze and especially bamboo documents in Mainland China offer us the opportunity to develop new approaches for studying texts and writing. But it should be recalled that traditional theories on Chinese writing (such as the *liu shu* 六書 theory, the distinction between *wén* and *zì*) are still far from being satisfactorily understood. Scholars typically refer to such theories without knowing really what they represented at the time they were introduced, and without asking themselves whether they provide an exact understanding of the Chinese writing system.[1] This is why I find it is necessary, now even more than in the past because of the recent findings, to reconsider traditional documents and to try to understand what exactly they can tell us about the history of and theories about writing in China.

The Han dynasty witnessed the unification and standardisation of the script initiated not long before by Qin Shihuangdi,[2] as well as a major shift in attitude towards writing: it was during the Han period that the first known theoretical reflections on the script emerged.[3] The graphological dictionary *Shuo wen jie zi* 説文解字, complied ca. 100 A.D. by Xu Shen 許慎 was produced in continuation of this new perspective, attributing cultural significance to the script and its study,[4] for which Han scholars already used the current modern term *xiao xue*,[5] which translates ele-

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1   The different lists of *liu shu* (see *infra* notes 22, 41 and 42) provided by Ban Gu and Xu Shen actually reveal more an original version of the genesis of writing than they provide a rigorous analysis of the structure of characters, see F. Bottéro, "La vision de l'écriture de Xu Shen à partir de sa présentation des *liu shu*," *Cahiers de Linguistique Asie Orientale* 27. 2 (1998): 161–191.

2   *Shiji* 6, 239.

3   By this I mean essentially the *liu shu* theory, introduced by Liu Xin, but also the distinction between *wén* and *zì*, adapted by Xu Shen in the *Shuowen*. Cf. infra note 22.

4   With the Western Han, one encounters a whole series of works specialised on characters and classified in the *Hanshu* under the subdivision *xiao xue* 小學 (*Hanshu* 30: 1719); cf. F. Bottéro, "Les manuels de charactères à l'époque des Han occidentaux," *in Education et instruction en Chine*, ed., Christine Nguyen Tri and Catherine Despeux (Paris – Louvain: Peeters, 2003), 99–120.

5   *Hanshu Yiwen zhi* 30: 1720–21. The term *xiao xue* starts having the meaning of studies of characters with the Han dynasty, see Chi Xiaofang, *Zhongguo gudai xiaoxue jiaoyu yanjiu* (Shanghai: Jiaoyu chubanshe, 1998), 2.

gantly the Latin *ars minor*. As the first systematic work on the written word, it constitutes a mine of information on the spoken language as well as on how writing was conceived at that time.

In this attempt to clarify how the relationship between writing and the spoken language was conceived in the dictionary *Shuo wen jie zi*, I will show that there never has been any evidence whatsoever to suggest that Xu Shen used *wén* and *zì* in the sense of "non-compound" and "compound" characters. I propose instead a new interpretation of the distinction between those two basic terms, essential both for the understanding of script theories and the relationship between writing and the spoken language. Finally, I will show how Xu Shen managed to elaborate an original and complex conception of writing by combining two competing approaches: a metaphysical symbolic analysis and a "linguistic" analysis of graphs.

1. Graphic interpretation prior to the *Shuo wen*

I shall begin with a presentation of some well-rehearsed examples of graphic interpretation prior to or contemporaneous with Xu Shen's own work.

1.1. Explanation of characters prior to the *Shuo wen*

Consider the most well-known examples of graph interpretation in the Classics:

> 夫文，止戈為武。
> Now from the graphic point of view, "stop" "halberds" forms "weapon." (*Zuozhuan* 23 *Xuan Gong* 12 [SSJZZ: 1882b]).[6]

> 故文，反正為乏。
> Thus from the graphic point of view, when one inverts "correct" one obtains "fall short." (*Zuozhuan* 24 *Xuan Gong* 15 [SSJZZ: 1888a]).[7]

> 於文，皿蟲為蠱。
> As for the graphic structure, "vessel" with "worms" forms "bewitchment." (*Zuozhuan* 41 *Zhao Gong* 1 [SSJZZ: 2025b]).[8]

Wu 武 is the prototype of *hui yi* 會意 in the *liu shu* list as given by Xu Shen in the postface of his dictionary. In these passages, the sentence modifying function of *wén* "from the point of view of the graphic structure" indicates a new level of reflection on Chinese characters in Warring States times.

Compare further:

> 古者蒼頡之作書也，自環者謂之私，背私謂之公,公私之相背也，乃蒼頡固以知
> 之矣。

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[6] Legge (1872, V. 1: 315) translates the following way: "The character for 'prowess' is formed by those for 'to stay' and 'a spear'."

[7] Legge (1872, V. 1: 328): "Just as the character for *correctness*, when reversed, produces that for *failure*."

[8] Legge (1872, V. 2: 581): "Chaou-mang [further] asked what he meant by 'insanity'; and [the physician] replied, 'I mean that which is produced by the delusion and disorder of excessive sensual indulgence. Look at the character; – it is formed by the characters for a vessel and for insects.'"

In ancient times, when Cangjie invented writing, he signified that which turns around itself by [the character] *si* 私 "selfish, personal," and turning one's back against "selfishness" he designated with [the character] *gong* 公 "public."[9] Cangjie must have known about the opposition between " selfishness" and "public." (*Han Fei zi xin jiaozhu* 49, 1105)

In all these examples, the graph analyses are presented within a context of discursive reasoning and represent arguments advanced to defend a type of conduct, reveal a reality or an established fact. This becomes evident when the quotations are placed in their proper context. In the case of the second quotation given above, for example:

天反時為災。地反物為妖。民反德為亂。亂則妖災生。故文反正為乏。
When the seasons of heaven are reversed, we have calamities, when the productions of earth are reversed, we have prodigious things; when the virtues of men are reversed, we have disorder. It is those disorders which give rise to the calamities and prodigious things. Thus from the graphic point of view, when one inverts "correct" one obtains "fall short." (*Zuozhuan* 24 *Xuan Gong* 15 [SSJZZ: 1888a]). (Legge V.1: 328, mod. FB).

In other words in each of these quotations, the author uses the graphic structure of a character to represent a key notion in the discursive reasoning to support or confirm a reality or a fact. The meaning of the character can be systematically related to the meaning of the graphic components, as in the case of *wu* 武 "weapon," *gu* 蠱 "bewitchment," or *gong* 公 "public." The opposing relation that exists between two opposite notions may also be represented visually through a graphic inversion, such as in the case of *zheng* "correct" as opposed to *fa* "fall short." But it might also be the graph itself that represents or symbolises the reality it refers to, just as in the case of *si* "selfish."[10]

In these texts, there is first the idea of a close relationship between the meaning of the graphic components (the parts) and the meaning of the characters (the whole), but there is also the idea of a profound correspondence between written signs and reality. In the *liu shu* list, the analysed graphs correspond to the prototype of *xiang xing* 象形 "pictographs" or *hui yi* 會意 "ideographs," and it is because they are thought to be essentially related with the realities they represent that writing as a whole is seen as symbolising rather than merely representing reality.

This vision of the script can also be found in a passage of the *Shiji* 史記 as well as in the *Lunheng* 論衡:

建為郎中令，書奏事，事下，建讀之，曰：『誤書！『馬』者與尾當五，今乃四，不足一。上譴死矣！』甚惶恐。其為勤謹慎，雖他皆如是。
When he was head of the secretaries, Jian asked for matters to be represented to the throne. Once done, Jian read it and said: "There is a mistake ! [The graph] horse with its tail must have five [strokes]. At present there are four, one is missing. Our superiors will condemn us of death." [The secretaries] were frightened.

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9   Han Fei relies on the "primary" graph of *si* 私, "selfish, personal," which is written 厶, to show that the two graphs representing the words "selfish, personal" and "public" express this opposition of meaning in their graphic structure. The graph for "public" would be formed by the components "turn one's back" and "private".

10 From the fact that it "turns around itself" (as shown by the seal graph), the sign used for the word *si* "selfish" evokes and symbolizes the idea of private interests.

This shows that Jian was diligent, cautious and acted with care, in any case, he was always like this. (*Shiji* 103: 2766 *Shi jian zhuan* 石建傳)

倉頡作書與事相連。
When Cangjie invented writing he associated it with events. (*Lunheng jiao shi*, *Qiguai pian* 奇怪篇 15, vol 1: 163).

1.2. Explanation of characters at the time of Xu Shen

Semantic interpretations of characters were wide-spread during the Han dynasty, along with paronomastic glosses. Xu Shen felt the need to criticise pure semantic interpretations of graphs by giving some examples in the postface of his dictionary. These examples correspond to analyses conceived by the advocates of the *jin wen* 今文 ("Modern Texts")[11] for the graphs *chang/zhang*, *dou* and *hui*.

> 馬頭人為長。
> A man with a horse's head makes "leader."
> 人持十為斗。
> A man holding the sign ten in his hand makes a "litre."
> 虫者屈中也。
> "Worm" is curved "middle."

Convinced that the Clerical script (*li shu* 隸書 of the Qin) was the script invented by Cangjie (the legendary inventor of the Chinese writing), supporters of "Modern Texts" based their analyses of the graphs on this script,[12] while Xu Shen based his own analysis on the older small seal script (*xiao zhuan* 小篆), in order to retrieve the original meaning of the characters. He therefore proposed a very different analysis of the same characters *zhang/chang* 長, *dou* 斗 and *hui* 虫:

> 長，久遠也。從兀從匕。兀者，高遠意也。久則變化。亾聲。[...]
> *Chang* is long in time or space. [Its graph] has *wu* 兀 as semantic and also has *hua* 匕 as semantic. *Wu* stands for the idea of lofty distance. With time things change and transform. 匕 is the phonetic... (9 B 32b)

> 斗，十升也。象形。有柄。
> *Dou* "the dipper" is 10 litres. It is a likeness of the relevant shape.[13] It has a handle. (14 A 32a)

> 虫，一名蝮。博三寸。首大如擘指。象其臥形
> *Hui*, is also called *fu* "viper". It is three inches wide with a head as large as a thumb. [The character] is a likeness of its lying form. (13 A 40–41)

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11 See M. Nylan, "The *Chin wen/Ku wen* Controversy in Han Times," *T'oung Pao* LXXX. 1–3 (1994): 83–146, and H. van Ess, "The Apocryphal texts of the Han Dynasty and the Old text / New Text Controversy," *T'oung Pao* LXXXV. 1–3 (1999): 29–64.

12 Atsuji Tetsuji 阿辻哲次, *Kanjigaku: Setsumon kaiji no sekai* 説文解字の世界 (Tôkyô: Tôkai daigaku shuppankai, 1985), 86. As Xu Shen writes in his postface (15 sup 19a in Duan's version), "[The partisans of the modern character texts] labelled the Qin clerical style the writing of Cangjie's time. They said [the graphs] had been passed on from father to son, so how could they change?", Thern, *Postface of the Shuo-wen Chieh-tzu: The First Comprehensive Chinese Dictionary* (Department of East Asian Languages and Literature, The University of Wisconsin, 1966), 15.

13 *Xiang xing* which is currently translated as "pictograph" is a technical term in the classification under the *liu shu*.

1.3. Explaining the graphs in the *Weishu* 緯書 (the apocryphal texts)

The *Weishu* or *Chenwei* constitute another interesting source for the interpretation of characters around Xu Shen's time.[14] These texts, very popular between the end of the Western Han and the beginning of the Eastern Han (25–200), were unfortunately lost. Collections of prophecies or divinations such as *Chunqiu Shuotici* and *Chunqiu Yuan ming bao* provide us the following analysis of the words *sù* 粟 "grain," *shù* 黍 "broomcorn millet" and *mù* 木 "tree."

> 『春秋説題辭』曰：粟助陽扶性，<u>粟之為言續也</u>。粟五變，一變而以陽生為苗性，粟[...]<u>故其字西米為粟</u>。西者金所立，米之陽精，故西字合米而為粟。
> The *Chunqiu shuo ti ci* says: "Broomcorn millet aids the Yang and supports human nature. The etymology of the word "broomcorn millet" is "achievement." The broomcorn millet is transformed five ways. It is transformed for the first time, and uses the Yang to bring forth into existence the sprouts. Thus, from the point of view of the structure of the character "west" plus "rice" makes "broomcorn millet." The west is the direction where metal is established and [metal] constitutes the Yang essence of rice, thus the character[15] *xi* "west" combines that for *mi* "rice" to make *su* "broomcorn millet." (*Taiping yu lan* 840, 3753)

> 黍『春秋説題辭』曰：精移火轉生黍，夏出秋改，黍之緒也。<u>故其立字，禾入米為黍</u>。為酒以扶老。
> The *Chunqiu shuo ti ci* says: "The subtle essence transfers the fire to create in turn the glutinous millet, to come out in summer and be changed in autumn, that is the regular pattern with the glutinous millet. When they made up the [relevant] character, the cereal enters the rice to make glutinous millet. From it one makes fermented wine in order to support the aged." (*Taiping yu lan* 842, 3762)

> 『春秋元命苞』曰：木者陽精，生於陰，故水者木之母也。木之為言觸也。氣動躍也，<u>其字八推十為木</u>，八者陰合，十者陽數。
> The *Chunqiu yuan ming bao* says: "Wood has a Yang essence, but is born from Yin. Hence water is the mother of wood. The etymology of 'wood' is to push. The vital energies move and jump about. As for the character it has 'eight' added onto 'ten' to make 'wood'. 'Eight' signifies the conjunction of Yin, and 'ten' is a Yang number.' (*Taiping yu lan* 952, 4226)

According to these texts, characters are analysed into pure semantic components: "west" and "rice" for "grain"; "cereal," "entering" "rice" for "broomcorn millet"; "eight" and "ten" for "tree," and the choice of the components is essentially explained in terms of the Yin/Yang and Five Elements theories.

The *Shuo wen* includes twelve quotations of Confucius concerning graphs. Ma Zonghuo has identified the origins of ten of them in the *Weishu*, which were presented during the Han dynasty as written by Confucius, and only two are from the *Lunyu*.[16]

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[14] Atsuji Tetsuji. "Isho jisetsu kô" 緯書字説考 (Characteristics of Early Chinese Paleography Recorded in the Wei-shu), in *Kangoshi no sho mondai* 漢語史の諸問題, ed. by Ozaki Yûjirô and Hirata Shôji (Kyôto: Kyôto daigaku jinbun kagaku kenkyûsho, 1988), 23–37.

[15] Note that *xi* "west" is a non-compound character which according to the traditional interpretation would have to be called *wén* and certainly not *zì*. According to the view presented in this paper the character has to be called a *zì* and not a *wén* as the text has it.

[16] Ma Zonghuo, *Shuowen jiezi yin qunshu kao* 説文解字引群書攷 (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 1959), I. 11b. The two quotations from the *Lunyu* can be found in the *Shuo wen* under the characters *fan* 璠 (*Shuowen* 1 A 20a) and *qiang* 羌 (*Shuowen* 4 A 35b–36).

In Xu Shen's quotations of Confucius some passages are identical to those of the *apocryphal texts* (I have underlined these passages in the following examples). Xu Shen reproduced some of the interpretations of the words, introducing eventually modifications, and ended up proposing a completely different graphic analysis, since he based his study of the structure of the graphs on the small seal script *xiao zhuan*:[17]

> 粟，嘉穀實也，從肉，從米，孔子曰：<u>粟之為言續也</u>。
> *Sù* "grain", is the fruit of a superior cereal. [The graph] has 肉 and "rice" as signif-ics. Confucius said: "The etymology of *sù* 'grain' is *ji* 'achievement'." (7A 32)

> 黍，禾屬而黏者也。以大暑而種，故謂之黍。從禾雨省聲。孔子曰，黍可為酒
> ，[故從]18<u>禾入水也</u>。
> *Shû* "broomcorn millet" is a kind of cereal and it is of the glutinous type. In the heat of the summer one plants it, hence it is called *shû*. [The graph] has *hé* "grain" as signific and an abbreviated form of *yû* "rain" as phonetic. Confucius said: "With broomcorn millet one can produce fermented wine, the 'cereal' is entered into 'water'." (7A 56)

> 木，冒也，冒地而生。東方之行。從屮。下象其根。
> *Mu* "tree" is reminiscent of *mao* "covered."[19] It grows while hidden in the soil. It is the element corresponding to the eastern regions. [The graph] has *chè* 屮 as signific. Its lower part is a likeness of the roots." (6A 1)

Compare further:

> 士，事也，數始於一，終於十，l從一從十，孔子曰：<u>推十合一為士</u>。
> *Shì* is to serve. In counting, one begins with "one" and ends with "ten." [The graph] has "one" as signific, it also has "ten" as signific. Confucius said: "If adding *shi* 'ten' onto *yi* 'one', one makes *shi* 'officer'." (1A 39)

The interpretations of the graphs taken from the *Zuozhuan*, as well as from the *Weishu*, presented in this section, give us some idea about the context in which Xu Shen's work was undertaken: no matter what script style (ancient or clerical) is discussed, the early graphic glosses always consist in simple semantic analysis. According to the *liu shu* theory, the analysed graphs either are classified as *xiang xing* "pictographs" or as *hui yi* "ideographs", but never as *xing sheng zi* 形聲字 "ideo-phonographs." In a more general sense, characters are seen as true symbols of reality.

Xu Shen faithfully reproduced the explanations of the *Zuozhuan* and Han Fei, which were based on ancient graphs,[20] but did not retain those favoured by the advocates of "Modern Texts" or those contained in the *Weishu*, which were based on modern graphs. Instead, he proposed another kind of analysis, taking into account

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[17] Xu Shen has suppressed the explanations that he thought were not corresponding to reality in the case of *su* 粟, but he modified them in the case of *shu* 黍 and replaced the component *mi* 米 "rice" by *shui* 水 "water" since the ancient graph for *shu* did not contain *mi* but a form resembling *shui*.

[18] These two characters were added by Duan Yucai based on the *Guangyun*.

[19] This is a paronomastic gloss.

[20] For the graphs *wu* 武 (12B 41a) and *fa* 乏 (2B 1a), Xu Shen only quotes the *Chunqiu zhuan*, but for *gu* 蠱 (13B 5b), *gong* 公 (2A 3a), and *si* 私 (9A 43b), he has also provided his own definitions and graphic analysis, which do not contradict the theories proposed in the *Zuozhuan* or in Han Fei. In the case of *zheng* 正 (2B 1a) and *si* 私 (7A 40b), Xu Shen did not repeat what he had already said about *fa* 乏, *gong* 公, and *si* 厶.

the phonetic components of the graphs, as we can see in the case of *chang/zhang* "long, far" and *shû* "broomcorn millet." The intention seems, to me at least, clear: interpretations of graphs must be based on an older style of script (just like the one used by the respective authors of the *Zuozhuan*[21] and Han Fei), but one also needs to rely on an appropriate method of investigation, recognising the phonetic components of the graphs.

At this point, one has to admit that the *jin wen/gu wen* 今文/古文 controversy led supporters of the ancient texts to incorporate writing in the context of an historical schema. Indeed, acknowledging the existence of older styles of script was equivalent to recognising that writing had evolved. On the other hand, no doubt the *jin wen/gu wen* controversy also inspired the ancient text supporters as they developed the *liu shu* theory.[22] Xu Shen takes his identification of the "phonetic" components of the Chinese writing from the Liu Xin's *liu shu* theory. His achievement was the systematic application of the *liu shu* theory to the whole vocabulary of graphs.

2. The evolution of the relation between writing graphs and speaking, as seen by Xu Shen

Xu Shen's subsumption of all the characters under the 540 radicals is his own original contribution. In accordance with his graphological interest, he analysed the phonetic components of the characters. The *Qieyun* glosses found in current editions of the *Shuo wen* are Xu Kai's (921–975) additions. With the Qing (1644–1911) dynasty, the study of the *Shuo wen* became eventually associated with that of the ancient and old rhymes, and thus phonology was tied together with paleography.[23] Yet, when one studies the *Shuo wen* today, one still limits oneself to the graphological domain without sufficient concern for the way Xu Shen understood the relationship between writing and words written. An example of this failure is the way the terms *wén* and *zì* are currently explained. These two terms were key notions for Xu Shen to include in the title of his dictionary, and as I will try to show they express a certain relationship between the script and the spoken word, without being limited to the graphic structure of the characters.

2.1 The title of the *Shuo wen jie zi*

The titles under which ancient Chinese books are known are not generally assumed to be the work of their authors. For instance, nothing suggests that Sima Qian would have recognised his work by the title *Shiji*. It is therefore worth pointing out that the title *Shuo wen jie zi* is present already in the earliest written evidence we have

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[21] In his postface (15 A 24 a–b), Xu Shen insists on the fact that the *Zuozhuan* belongs to the Old Texts tradition.

[22] The origins of the *liu shu* theory date back to Liu Xin, who was indirectly the master of Xu Shen, Ban Gu and Zheng Zhong, the three authors who presented their own original list of *liu shu*. See Tang Lan, *Zhongguo wenzixue* (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1979), 67, and also note 41 below. Atsuji goes further and suggests that the semantic explanations of graphs found in the *Weishu* opened the way for to the Liu Xin's *liu shu* theory, see "Isho jisetsu kô" 37.

of the book, a letter written to the emperor in Xu Shen's life time by his own son.[24] We can safely assume that *Shuo wen jie zi* was Xu Shen's own title and that the terminology in that title is of capital importance in the interpretation of the purposes of his *magnum opus*.

Now the title insists on a distinction between the terms *wén* and *zì*, for which there is no evidence before Xu Shen's time, and I suggest we had better be sure what exactly that innovative distinction was, causing Xu Shen to choose the most analytic title of any book in ancient China.[25]

No known works prior to the *Shuo wen* include these two terms in their title, the *Hanshu Yiwenzhi* records a single work called *Bié zì* lost long ago.[26] On the other hand, following Xu Shen's work, at least seven books have the phrase *wén zì*[27] in their title and no less than 40, the term *zì*.[28] Xu Shen's influence on the use of these two terms can be easily recognised. We now have to ask ourselves: What then was the precise meaning of *wén* and *zì* in the title *Shuo wen jie zi*? How did Xu Shen interpret them?

2.2 The distinction between *wén* and *zì*

Today, most scholars agree that the distinction between *wén* and *zì* is a graphological distinction between "non-compound characters" (*wén*) and "compound characters" (*zì*). But is this distinction really valid for the *Shuo wen*? This question merits being asked since the equation *wén*=non-compound characters did not exist before the *Shuo wen*. To interpret *wén* in the sense of "non-compound character," in the examples of graphic analyses of the *Zuozhuan* (presented above in section 1.1.), one has to first assume first that the term *wén* did not apply to the characters *wu* 武 "weapon" and *gu* 蠱 "bewitchment," since these are explicitly interpreted as compound characters. In addition, one has to assume that *wén* does not apply either to *chong* 蟲 "insects, worms," which is a graphic component of *gu* 蠱 "bewitchment," since this is also a compound character. For all these examples, it is thus necessary to consider *wén* in the sense of just "graph" or "pattern," without anachronistically adding graphological semantic components. There is no pre-*Shuo wen* evidence of an opposition between *wén* and *zì*. When used to refer to Chinese characters the two words may have had different connotations but, as we shall see shortly, they both referred to the same thing: Chinese characters.

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[23] William Baxter, *A Handbook of Old Chinese Phonology* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1992), 160, 162.

[24] See the text starting with *Yu shi da Han* 于時大漢 following the postface of the *Shuo wen*, 15B 7a in Duan Yucai's version and 15B 1a in Xu Xuan's edition.

[25] Indeed, it would be interesting to find another classical Chinese work which proclaims the basic distinctions it makes in the title.

[26] *Hanshu* 30, 1719 *sq.*

[27] *Wenzi zhengyi* 文字整疑, *Xunsu wenzi lüe* 訓俗文字略, *Wenzi pu* 文字譜, *Wenzi yin* 文字音, etc. *Suishu* 32, 942 *sq.*

[28] *Zishu* 字書, *Zazizhi* 雜字指, *Gujin zigu* 古今字詁, *Zazi* 雜字, *Zilin* 字林, etc., *cf. Suishu* 32, 942 *sq.*

2.2.1. The definition of *wén* and *zì* in the *Shuo wen*

If one wants to understand what Xu Shen meant by *wén* and *zì*, the first thing to do is to immerse oneself in the text of *Shuo wen*, and, above all, to refer to the definitions given in the body of the dictionary. *Wén* and *zì* are defined in the following way:

> *wén* 文，錯畫也。象交文。
> *wén* consists of intersecting lines. [Its graph] is a likeness of an intersecting pattern. (9A 20a)

> *zì* 字，乳也。從子在宀下。子亦聲。
> *zì* is to breast-feed. [The graph] has *zî* "child" under "roof" as significs. *Zî* "child" is at the same time phonetic. (14B 25a)

Neither *wén* nor *zì* are defined as "character," and there is no talk of any distinction between "non-compound" and "compound character" to be found in Xu Shen's definitions of these words. In itself this proves nothing. After all, the *Shuo wen* is a graphologically etymological dictionary, in which Xu Shen explains the relevant primary meaning of the written words. In the case of *wén* 文, it is essentially a matter of explaining the meaning of *wén* 紋 "stripes, lines, figures," which, according to Xu Shen, would be the original meaning of this graph, and on the basis of which the meaning of *wénzhang* 文章 "ornament" would be elaborated. In the case of *zì*, it is a matter of making known the graphologically primary meaning of this graph as it was used in the Classics, that is "to breast-feed."

It is true that the graph *zì* 字 contains, according to Xu Shen, two semantic elements "roof" and *zî* 子 "child," the latter also playing the role of a phonetic element,[29] and that the graph *wén* 文, which does not consist of smaller components, can well be considered as a non-compound character. I do not intend to deny the existence of non-compound and compound characters. This is a fact which dates back to the beginnings of Chinese writing, at least since the *jiagu wen* 甲古文 (oracle bone inscriptions) and the *jin wen* 金文, (bronze inscriptions) and of which the writers of Chinese—including Xu Shen—were inevitably aware. I will merely question the assumption that Xu Shen defined these two terms in this way throughout his dictionary, and that he made of this the basis of his terminological distinction between *wén* and *zì*. In fact, as we shall see, such an interpretation is completely absent from the *Shuo wen*.

2.2.2. *Wén* and *zì* in the postface of the *Shuo wen*

It is therefore to the postface of the *Shuo wen* that one has to turn to look for the meaning of *wén* and *zì* in the sense that Xu Shen uses them in his dictionary. Xu

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[29] As can be seen in the definition of *zî* 子 in the *Shuo wen* (14 B 24b), the meaning of this component *zî* 子 is clearly related to the idea of increasing: 子：十一月陽氣動。萬物滋。人以為偁。象形 "In the 11th month, when the *Yang* energies begin to move, the Myriad Creatures increase in number. People use it as a designation. It resembles the form of what it designates." On the other hand, *zì* 字 is both defined as a *hui yi* and as a *xing sheng*; see the discussion in section 3 below.

Shen's postface contains 10 occurrences of *wén*[30] (without including the expressions *gu wen* and *zhuan wen*), 11 of *zì* (+ 1 *qi zì*) while *wén zì* is mentioned 3 times.

The crucial passage which indicates what I regard as traditional prejudice runs as follows:

> 倉頡之初作書蓋依類象形故謂之文。其後形聲相益即謂之字。
> When Cangjie first invented writing, it is presumably because he copied the forms according to their resemblances that they were called *wén* "patterns." Then forms and pronunciations were added to each other, so they were called *zì*.

I concede that this passage appears to make a distinction between *wén* and *zì* where *wén* relates to characters representing the likeness of things and *zì* refers to characters which contain phonetic elements in addition to the *wén* representing the likeness of things.

But only by neglecting the historicity of the process of the creation of the Chinese writing might one comfortably conclude that Cangjie decided to make two kinds of characters: the non-compound ones and the compound ones. In fact, the text says nothing of the kind. The distinction made is not between compound and non-compound, but between characters basing themselves on the images of things only, on the one hand, and graphs in which 形聲相益 "form and sound are added to each other."

Now as traditional sinological lore would have it, the way one adds *sheng* 聲 to *xing* 形 is by adding a phonetic element to a signific element as in *xing sheng zi*. Initially this may sound plausible enough, but it would mean that only *xing sheng zi* should qualify according to Xu Shen's system as *zì*. As we shall see presently the word *zì* is used nowhere else in the whole book to refer to the class of *xing sheng zi* only. My claim in what follows is that the word is not so used in this context either. Adding *sheng* 聲 to *xing* 形 in Xu Shen's genealogy of writing means assigning pronunciations to graphs and does not mean adding explicit phonetic elements to every graphs. It is all about establishing a pervasive and necessarily link between graphic representations *wén* and words of the Chinese language. *Wén* are graphs and *zì* are graphic representations of spoken words. It is true, as tradition has it, that this link of graphic representations to words and their pronunciations becomes explicit in *xing sheng zi*, but a character does not have to contain an explicitly phonetic and non-signific graphic element in order to represent a word of the Chinese language. Non-compound characters are in fact as unambiguously *zì* in Xu Shen's system as compound characters containing phonetic elements. Thus, I conclude that the passage under discussion does not involve a unique usage of the word *zì* in *Shuo wen jie zi* as traditional lore must pretend, but that the word *zì* is used here as it is used

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[30] Compared to Duan Yucai's version, Xu Xuan's version of the postface of the *Shuo wen* only counts 10 occurrences of *wén*, since the phrase "As for *wén*, they are the basis of the images of things 文者物象之本 "is missing. It was added by Duan Yucai on the basis of Kong Yingda's (574–648) quotation of the "*Shuo wen xu*" 説文序 on *Zuozhuan* Duke Xuan 15 (SSJZS:1888a). It seems unlikely that Kong Yingda was quoting anything other than what he found in his copy of Xu Shen's postface. Moreover it may be tempting for some to read this isolated phrase along the lines of "'Non-compound characters' refer to the basics of the images of things." However, the character under discussion in the *Zuozhuan*, *zheng* 正, is explicitly specified by Xu Shen as a *non* simplex character, i.e. according to current misapprehensions as a *zì* and not a *wén* (*Shuo wen* 2B 1a).

everywhere else throughout the book when the linguistic usage (and not the grap-
hological etymology) is at issue.

It turns out, of course, that characters basing themselves on the images of things
may be either non-compound or compound and, in both cases, the definition as the
traditionalists take it would suggest that since they have no "added *sheng*" they must
be called *wén* and not *zì*. Thus contrary to traditional interpretations I would argue
that Xu Shen's definition does not provide any basis whatsoever for any distinction
between what is simplex and compound. Instead Xu Shen's distinction is between
what does and what does not write a word (or in some cases several distinct words)
of the Chinese language, as I will explain below.

Having said this, the question arises of the nature of the historical process of the
invention of writing described by Xu Shen. The traditionalists have it that Cangjie
started out writing words for which he had non-compound characters and that he
proceeded later (*hou* 後) to create characters which not only wrote words with a
pronunciation but also contained graphic elements which indicated that pronuncia-
tion.

The traditionalist account thus supposes that the two historical stages were
essentially very close to each other and one might therefore wonder why Xu Shen
would make such a point of the stage of graphic representation *wén* on the one hand
preceding that of characters which write words of the Chinese language on the other
hand.

As an alternative, I submit that one might have to consider a radically different
view of Xu Shen's historical account of writing. According to this view Cangjie
set out by depicting patterns of things. At this stage he was not writing words. He
was representing things through written emblems. Then later (*hou* 後) an entirely
new development occurred: Cangjie employed his images to represent words of the
spoken language by attaching (*yi* 益) the phonetic dimension i.e. pronunciation to
them. Thus the passage from *wén* to *zì* would signify the passage from depicting rea-
lity to writing the words describing reality. Xu Shen would then be reconstructing
not only the historical development of character typology, he would be describing
the very genesis of the practice of writing down words at all. He would thus not
merely be a classifier of characters but a philosophical historian of the origins of
writing itself.

I contend that there is ample evidence to suggest that Xu Shen had indeed a pro-
found philosophy of the origins of writing words and not just a remarkable system
of classification for the graphs used to write words. Thus this paper is designed to do
justice to a remarkable intellectual feat in the history of linguistics and it refuses to
trivialise this achievement as a mere matter of classification of graphs.

The reason why I do this is that the distinction supposed to be made in this pas-
sage between compound and non-compound characters is in point of fact nowhere
in evidence throughout the extensive received text of the *Shuo wen jie zi*, its postface
and the Eastern Han sources relying directly to this work. If the distinction between
compound characters *zì* and non-compound characters *wén* had been so important
as to deserve inclusion in the title of the book, one would surely expect clear evi-

dence of it in the use of the characters *wén* and *zì*. It is therefore worthwhile to line up all occurences of the words *wén* and *zì* in the postface of the *Shuo wen jie zi* to see whether any of them even permit of a reading in accordance with the traditional view.

I thus find twenty-four relevant examples.

A. *Wén*

1) 倉頡之初作書蓋依類象形故謂之文。
When Cangjie first invented writing, it is presumably because he copied the forms according to their resemblances that they were called *wén* "patterns."

2) 古者庖犧氏之王天下." [...]視鳥獸之文。
In ancient times when Paoxi ruled over the world...he observed the markings on birds and animals.

These markings are manifestly not non-compound characters.

3)〈夬:揚于王庭〉。言文者宣教明化於王者朝廷。
"*Kuai*: exhibit at the royal court." It means that it is the written texts that transmit the teachings [of the ancients] and manifest education at the king's court.

The texts involved cannot be taken to consist of non-compound characters

4) 丞相李斯[...]罷其不與秦文合。
Prime Minister Li Si... proposed to abandon those graphs that did not correspond to the Qin graphs.

Xu Shen is not suggesting what current opinion would force us to assume, namely that Li Si's proposal was restricted to non-compound characters!

5) 及亡新居攝使大司空甄豐等校文書。
When the overthrown house of Xin [Wang Mang] usurped the throne, the Minister of Works Zhen Feng and others were ordered to verify the texts and documents.

Xu Shen is not imagining that the proofreading was of non-compound characters in these documents only.

6) 而世人大共非訾以為好奇者也故詭更正文。
However most scholars of our time reject them [the discoveries]. They consider that it is people full of curiosity that intentionally and dishonestly transformed the regular graphs.

The graphs, dishonestly transformed, are in no way intended to be non-compound graphs.

7) 言必遵修舊文。
It means that it is necessary to respect and cultivate the ancient graphs.

The graphs concerned are manifestly not intended to be non-compound graphs only.

8) 孔子曰吾猶及史之闕文。

The master said: "I can still remember when scribes left a blank for [uncertain] graphs."

The characters that are left blank are by no means only non-compound characters.

9) 今敘篆文合以古籀。

Now I have arranged the [small] seal graphs together with the ancient and the *zhou* [graphs].

There is no reason to think that the characters that Xu Shen claim to have arranged are only non-compound graphs.

10) 此十四篇五百四十部也九千三百五十三文 [解説凡十三萬三千四百四十一字]。

These 14 chapters comprise 540 radicals, 9,353 graphs (and a total of 133,441 written words for the explanations).

The *Shuo wen* dictionary does not, of course, contain anything like 9,353 non-compound characters. Saying this does not mean that the *wén* counted here are pre-scribal pictorial representation of the type Xu Shen thought preceded the *zì*. However, the focus of *wén* is on graphology and physical shape of characters. Xu Shen is writing a dictionary with a primary graphological orientation in contrast to the *Fangyan* which focuses on the use of words rather than the use of graphs. The subtle difference between *wén* and *zì* becomes manifest when one imagines them interchanged in this passage. The *zì* used in the explanations are simply written words. These are not quite the same thing as graphs to be discussed. And if the two words are interchanged the resulting sentence would not in my view sound Han Dynasty Chinese. Numbers of characters are traditionally discussed in terms of numbers of *yan* 言 and from Qin times onwards increasingly in terms of numbers of *zì*.[31]

B. Zì

11) 其後形聲相益即謂之字。

Then forms and pronunciations were added to each other, so they were called *zì*.

12) 字者言孳乳而浸多也。

Zì means to engender and to increase gradually.

13) 假借者本無其字依聲託事。

Phonograms originally they had no written word of their own, they were represented according to their pronunciation.

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[31] For numbers of characters counted in terms of *zì* see, for example, the bamboo-slip fragments n° S002, S003, S017, S026 of the *Shijing* discovered in Fuyang (Anhui) in 1977, dated before 165 B.C. (the year of the closing of the tomb) in Hu Bingsheng and Han Ziqiang, *Fuyang Han jian Shijing yanjiu* (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1988), 2. In the *Shiji* one can still find numbers of characters discussed in terms of *yan* see, for example, the biography of Han Fei, *Shiji* 63, 2147 故作孤憤・五蠹[…]十餘萬言。I have found a only single instance where the number of characters constituting a text was given in terms of *wén*, see the end of the chapter Yanli 燕禮 in the *Yili* found in Wuwei where on can read: 記三百三文, *Wuwei hanjian* (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1960), 12.

The thought that loan characters have to be compound in order to be loan characters is particularly absurd: since a very large number of them are in fact simplex.

> 14) 諷籀書九千字乃得為史。
> Those who could recite and write 9,000 <u>characters</u> were appointed as officials.

The reciting is not of compound characters only.

> 15) 凡倉頡已下十四篇凡五千三百四十字。
> The 14 chapters, starting from the *Cangjie pian* [down to the *Xunzuan pian*] comprise a total of 5,340 <u>characters</u>.

These characters definitely include non-compound characters.

> 16) 二曰奇字。
> The second [style of writing] was called the odd <u>characters</u>.

A character does not have to be compound in order to be written in odd style.

> 17) 諸生競逐說字解經誼。
> Scholars competed in explaining <u>written words</u> and interpreting the meaning of the Classics.

The controversial characters were definitively not all compound.

> 18) 廷尉說律至以字斷法。
> When the court magistrates explain the laws, they go as far as to give a verdict according to the <u>written words</u>.

> 19) 苛人受錢。苛之字止句也。
> [In the case of] reprimanding a person who received bribes, the <u>written word</u> *ke* (*he*) "punish severely" [is analysed in two elements] *zhi* "stop, arrest" and *gòu* "seize" [arrest the man and seize the money].

The written evidence was definitively not in compound characters only.

> 20) 俗儒 [...] 未嘗睹字例之條。
> Mediocre scholars...without ever having seen the principles of the system of <u>characters</u>.

> 21) [此十四篇五百四十部也九千三百五十三文文]解說凡十三萬三千四百四十一字。
> (These 14 chapters comprise 540 radicals, 9,353 graphs and) a total of 133,441 <u>written words</u> for the explanations

Xu Shen is surely not suggesting that the only characters currently misunderstood were the compound ones.

C. *Wén zì*

The compound *wén zì* seems to be explicitly general so as to allow for a typological variety just as *yan yu* is an explicitly general way of referring to ways of talking:

22) 其後諸侯力政[...]言語異聲文字異形
Later, the feudal lords established governments by force...with languages differing in pronunciation, and [all manner of] <u>characters</u> differing in forms.

23) 孝平皇帝時，徵禮等百餘人，令説文字未央廷中
During the reign of Emperor Ping (1 B.C. to 5 A.D.), [Yuan] Li and a hundred other people were summoned to explain the <u>characters</u> at the Weiyang palace.

24) 蓋文字者經藝之本。王政之始。
It would appear that <u>written characters</u> are the foundation of the Classics and the Arts, the beginning of the royal Government.

According to these examples *wén* is associated with the markings on animal skin, with the patterns representing the essential elements of things, with different styles of scripts (Qin graphs, ancient graphs: *jiu wen*, *gu wen*, *zhuan wen*) and with texts. On the other hand *zì* is associated in addition with the pronunciation of characters. It applies even to the *jiajie* "phonograms," but also to the whole set of signs that constitute a text. *Zì* are pronounceable signs and the ability to pronounce and write them correctly is taught in schools and evaluated in civil service examinations.

Wén, therefore, has the meaning of "markings" (example 2), of "patterns" (1) of "graphs" (4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10), but also of "text" (3, 5). It is the pictorial, graphically mimetic and visual aspect of *wén* that is retained. *Zì* represent the written words. So with *zì* it is the relationship between writing and speaking which has become an essential feature. The *wén*, have an intrinsic pictorial meaning, the *zì* make the link with pronunciation. Thus inevitably one can only *feng zì* 諷字 (14), but not *feng wén* 諷文.

As we have seen, both *wén* and *zì* can refer generally to "characters," but seen from a different angle. I propose that a good way of representing the contrast between the two words is to translate *zì* as "character" (or "written words") and *wén* as "graph." The compound *wén zì* situates writing firmly in the context of the spoken language: *wén zì* corresponds antithetically to *yan yu* "spoken language, speech, talk."

3. The originality of Xu Shen's conception of writing as revealed in the *Shuo wen*

The reinterpretation of *wén* and *zì* that I am proposing here involves much more than just a "correction" of terminology (*zheng ming* 正名). It challenges the well-established idea that there is a single and unique theory of writing in China which dates from time immemorial.[32] Instead, it contends that there are in fact two distinct approaches for interpreting writing:
– a metaphysical symbolic analysis of graphs;
– a "linguistic" analysis of characters.
For example, in the *Zuozhuan*, the *wén* are interpreted as symbols of the current reality, but also as harbingers of the future, of what will come about:

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[32] For such a representative understanding of the theory of writing in China see Yao Xiaosui, *Zhongguo wenzixue shi* (Jilin: Jiaoyu chubanshe, 1995), 72.

宋武公生仲子。仲子生而有文在其手。曰為魯夫人。故仲子歸于我。
Wugong, Prince of Song, had a daughter named Zhongzì. When she was born, Zhongzi had a mark on her hand meaning that she would become the principal wife of the Prince of Lu. This is why she came to marry our prince." (*Zuozhuan 2 Yin gong* 1st year [SSJZS: 1713a])

成季之將生也。桓公使卜楚丘之父[...]及生。有文在其手。曰友。遂以命之。
Just before the birth of Cheng Ji, Duke Huan made the father of Chu Qiu, master of the diviners, consult the tortoise-shell, which he did, saying, "It will be a boy, whose name shall be called You …." When the boy was born, there was a figure on his hand – that of the character *you* , and he was named accordingly! (*Zuozhuan11 Min gong* 2nd year [SSJZS: 1787c; Legge V. I, p. 129]).

武王邑姜方震大叔。夢帝謂己。余命而子曰虞[...]及生。有文在其手。曰虞。遂以命之。
When Yi Jiang, the wife of king Wu, was pregnant with Tai Shu, she dreamt that God said to her, "I have named your son Yu".… When the child was born, there appeared on his hand the character Yu [by which he was named accordingly]. (*Zuozhuan 41 Zhao gong* 1st year [SSJZS: 2023c; Legge V. II, p. 580])

In these three examples, *wén* does not, strictly speaking, have the meaning of a character, even less of a non-compound character. It designates marks such as those one can read in the line's of a person's hand. Here, these marks are to be interpreted as "Prince Lu's principal wife"[33] or as a person's name. They provide children at birth with a part of their destiny. One can again see the close relationship between marks, that is the inscribed (or visual) signs, and reality.

This way of reading the future through the marks or lines on the hand recalls the practice of divination based on oracular cracks. Unfortunately we know nothing about the procedures used by the diviners for interpreting oracular signs, but there can be little doubt that this practice profoundly affected how written signs in China were seen, and, it seems to me, constituted and continues to constitute a culturally important albeit linguistically unjustifiable metaphysical perception of writing as symbolic revelation of reality.[34]

Thus if some made imaginative comments on graphs, many others made imaginative comments on sound derivation. This is, for example, suggested by the paronomastic method *shengxun* 聲訓, that was used to explain one character by another similarly pronounced character. The paronomastic method was actually a matter of explaining a word by using another word and providing a motivated etymology of both spoken and written words, essentially according to the system of correspondences contained in the Yin/Yang and Five Elements theories.[35] It was used in various contexts in pre-Qin texts and commentaries of the Classics: by Confucius,[36] Mengzi,[37] but also by Xu Shen, who referred back to it in his dictionary: 東動也 (6A 66b) "*Dong* 'east' is

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[33] Which could in any case never correspond to a single character.

[34] The opposite is also quite possible: writing may have influenced the interpretation of divinatory signs, as seems to have been the case in ancient Mesopotamia, see Jean Bottéro, "Symptômes, signes, écriture en Mésopotamie ancienne," in *Divination et rationalité* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1974), 70–197.

[35] As Wang Li pointed out (*Zhongguo yuyan xueshi*, Gufeng chubanshe, 1988: 44), the paronomastic method represents an important stage in the history of Chinese linguistics.

[36] "To govern means to establish a correct order 政者正也 *Lunyu* 12, *Yan Yuan* 顏淵, in *Lunyu jishi* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1996), 864.

[37] "*Xiang* means 'rearing,' *xiao* means 'teaching' and *xu* means 'archery' 庠者養也，校者教也，序者射也." *Mengzi zhengyi, Teng wéngong A* 滕文公 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju1987), 343.; tr. D. C. Lau *Mencius*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), 1. 99.

reminiscent of *dong* 'movement,' " etc. According to the correspondences in the theory of the Five Elements, the East corresponds to springtime, in other words, the period when the Myriad Creatures (re)start their activity.

Parallel to the inscribed or printed signs which reveal or symbolise reality, writing can also be focused on as recording spoken words. This last way of looking at writing is confirmed by a certain number of examples to be found in pre-Qin works and Han works, in which writing reflects speech.[38] As Jean Levi said: "la main obéit à la bouche, sitôt qu'on est en position de scribe, la parole investit l'écriture."[39]

It therefore seems to me that Xu Shen's originality was to have combined in his dictionary two traditional approaches to writing.
– On the one hand, an ancient approach which treats these marks as symbols of reality and which dates back to divination by cracks in scapulas and turtle plastrons (illustrated, for example, by the reading of the future through the marks on the hand in the *Zuozhuan*), and
– On the other hand, the "linguistic" conception of writing, which is imposed by the very function of writing – recording the spoken language – for those who use it.

From our point of view, influenced by modern linguistics, there appears here to be a substantial paradox: as soon as one deals with characters which refer to words, one finds oneself necessarily treating writing as recording the spoken language, and not as a symbol of reality. But, as can be seen in the characters that Xu Shen presents both as *hui yi* 會意 and *xing sheng* 形聲, switching from one register to the other, or even combining the two, came naturally to him. For example, in the case of *zì* 字 (*see above:* "*zì* is to breast-feed. [The graph] has *zî* "child" under "roof" as significs. *Zî* "child" is at the same time phonetic"), Xu Shen points out that the element *zî* 子 " child" plays a double role, both semantic and phonetic. To say that this element plays a semantic role is to make a *hui yi* of the character *zì* 字, that is to say to take it as a symbol of reality; but to say that this element plays a phonetic role is to make a *xing sheng* of the character *zì* 字 and, in the process, associate it automatically to a spoken word.

One could consider that once Xu Shen has shown that a graph contains a phonetic element, then its status of *xing sheng* is established,[40] and the *hui yi* analysis of the same graph becomes irrelevant (at least from our point of view which considers that characters refer to words and are not ideographs or symbols of reality). And yet, Xu Shen endeavoured to make the graphic structure of this *xing sheng* "legible" by showing that it is, in surprisingly many cases, at the same time (*jian* 兼) a *hui yi* structure. Xu Shen superimposes a metaphysical symbolic interpretation upon his linguisitic analysis.

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[38] See for example, *Lunyu, Weiling gong* 衛靈公 15.6: "Zi zhang wrote [these words] down on his sash 子張書諸紳." *Lunyu jishi* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1996), 1067. C. Harbsmeier, *Language and Logic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 32, gives anecdotes by Han Fei and Yang Xiong illustrating this point of view.

[39] Jean Levi, *La Chine romanesque* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1995), 47.

[40] It is the presence or absence of a phonetic element that constitutes the distinction between *hui yi* and *xing sheng*.

Moreover, this way of seeing things seems to me to be confirmed by Xu Shen's own original presentation of the *liu shu* in the postface of the *Shuo wen*.[41] As I have already mentioned earlier, the *gu wen* partisans integrated writing into an historical schema. Nevertheless, unlike the presentation of *liu shu* by the historian Ban Gu,[42] Xu Shen places the *xing sheng* ("ideo-phonographs") before the *hui yi* ("ideographs"). But one is tempted to consider the *hui yi* as a combination of pictographs and therefore as types of graphs little more developed than pictographs.[43] From Xu Shen's perspective, the *hui yi* seem to correspond to the most developed types of graphs, certainly since, unlike the *xing sheng*, "half legible" because of their unique semantic component, their meaning could be understood on the basis of all of their graphic components and therefore represented or translated better the realities of the world. The imitation of the forms of the universe remains for Xu Shen in his postface the corner-stone of the invention of writing. As the postface suggests, the Ancients knew how to read before they knew how to write.[44] It is therefore essential in Xu Shen's perspective to be able to "read" (decipher) the graphs, which reveal hidden truths.

4. Conclusion

I hope the persistent terminological confusion alluded to in the title of this paper should have been dispelled by now. There has never been any evidence to show that Xu Shen used either *wén* or *zì* as meaning "non-compound characters" or "compound characters" respectively. This innovative interpretation appeared centuries after Xu Shen's life and became the official doctrine under the influence of Zheng Qiao 鄭樵 (1104–1162) of the Song dynasty. I have tried to show that the use of *wén* and *zì* in Xu Shen's work reveals a fundamental distinction between graphic structure on the one hand, and the writing system on the other. Making this distinction constituted a fundamental step in a development of the Chinese linguistics.

Finally, it remains significant that having made this crucial theoretical distinction and having given it preeminence in the title of his book, Xu Shen procedes to pay sustained attention to metaphysical and clearly non-linguistics aspects of the Chinese vocabulary. Thus in the work of Xu Shen no radical separation of linguistics from metaphysics and philosophy was maintained. Indeed, as an observer of the modern history of linguistics and lexicography, one may be entitled to wonder whether a professionalist radical separation of these disciplines ever was desirable.

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[41] Xu Shen has adopted a particular sequence for the *liu shu*: *zhishi, xiang xing, xing sheng, hui yi, jia jie* and *zhuan zhu* (the following note shows the difference between Xu Shen and Ban Gu's *liu shu)*. Curiously enough, during the Tang dynasty Xu Shen's own original order of the *liu shu* was replaced by that of Ban Gu, but his own terminology was retained. This shows, in my opinion, the failure to comprehend the order which was specific to Xu Shen.

[42] Ban Gu has the following order and names for the *liu shu*: *xiang xing, xiang shi, xiang yi, xiang sheng, zhuan zhu* and *jia jie, cf.* supra notes 22 and 41.

[43] In other words, the *hui yi* (or *xiang yi*) should follow the *xiang xing* and come before the *xing sheng* (*xiang sheng*), just like in Ban Gu's list of the *liu shu, cf.* supra note 41.

[44] As Xu Shen noted in his postface (*Shuo wen* 15A 1), the eight trigrams were created on the basis of observing the celestial and terrestrial phenomena and writing was created on the basic of observing the tracks of the feet of birds and animals.

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