

# CĀNG JIÉ AND THE INVENTION OF WRITING:

## REFLECTIONS ON THE ELABORATION OF A LEGEND

FRANÇOISE BOTTÉRO

The Chinese have traditionally drawn on one or several stories to explain the origin of their writing.<sup>1</sup> Cāng Jié 蒼頡<sup>2</sup> is known in China as the scribe who invented writing, after observing the marks left on the ground by birds and animals. Modern specialists of the Chinese writing system all agree to say that this is only a legend,<sup>3</sup> but the history of the legend of Cāng Jié is nevertheless interesting to retrace for several reasons. The theme is relatively well-documented, and allows us to understand how the legend was constructed and became established; it also provides us with a 'window' into how writing was perceived by the different authors who have referred to it. This legend broaches the fundamental problem of writing. Ancient Chinese authors recognized the importance of this topic, and sought to explain the origin of writing within their own conceptual framework, or to give it a particular role, before they considered it to be at the very heart of the government.<sup>4</sup> This is what we will see in the citations presented in the following pages. At the same time we will be able to understand how, having fluctuated in different directions depending on the authors, the legend has benefited from the written form to become propagated and almost rigidified since the Eastern Hàn.

---

<sup>1</sup> For the different legends on the origins of Chinese writing, see, for example, Táng Lán 1979:54, Sūn Jūnxī 1991:20, Zhāng Yùjīn & Xià Zhōnghuá 2001:52.

<sup>2</sup> The name is written as often with the component 'grass': 蒼, as without it: 倉.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Táng Lán 1979:51 *et seq.*; Sūn Jūnxī 1991:17-18, Qiú Xīguī 1988:28 (English translation:44). It is interesting to note that, according to Qiú, writing was invented by the labouring classes, but that, later, shamans and diviners, who were serving the governing classes, must have played a part in its development.

<sup>4</sup> This is what we will find in *Huáinánzǐ* 20 and in the *Shuōwén* 15, *cf. Infra*:143, 149-153.

*Cāng Jié, the inventor of writing?*

Cāng Jié's name first appears with Xúnzǐ in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century before our era. One needs to note however that Xúnzǐ (c. 298-235 B.C.) mentioned Cāng Jié not as the inventor of writing, but as someone who appreciated it and was deeply involved in it:

故好書者眾矣，而倉頡獨傳者，壹也；好稼者眾矣，而后稷獨傳者，壹也。

Thus, those who have been fond of writing have been many, yet that Cāng Jié alone has been remembered is due to his unity of purpose. Those who have been fond of husbandry have been many yet that Hòujì alone has been remembered is due to his unity alone.<sup>5</sup> (Knoblock 1994 vol.3:107)

In this passage, Cāng Jié is presented alongside other mythical heroes such as Hòujì 后稷, Kuí 夔 and Shùn 舜, to whom one owes the sowing of seeds, music and the sense of duty (all essential features for social life). This suggests the major importance that Xúnzǐ attributed to writing. But, at the same time, one should note that in the following part of the text Xúnzǐ mentioned Chuí 倕, Fúyóu 浮游, Xīzhòng 奚仲, and Chéng Dù 乘杜 whom he considered to be true inventors (of the bow, the arrow, the chariot, or the harness), while he insisted that it was not they who mastered the arts of archery or charioteering, since mastery of these techniques or arts required concentration and perseverance.

倕作弓，浮游作矢，而羿精於射；奚仲作車，乘杜作乘馬，而造父精於御。自古及今，未嘗有兩而能精者也。

Chuí invented the bow and Fúyóu made the arrow, but it was Yì who excelled in archery. Xīzhòng invented the chariot and Chéng Dù discovered how to harness horses to it, yet it was Zàofù who excelled at charioteering. From antiquity up to the present day there has never been anyone who has been able to excel in two fields at the same time. (Knoblock 1994, vol.3:107) (F.B. modified)

In other words, for Xúnzǐ, there was a clear difference between creation and mastery of an art or a technique; Cāng Jié did not come under the category of the inventors, but of those who committed themselves or assiduously practiced a specialization.

Hán Fēi (c. 280-233), who studied with Xúnzǐ, returned to the theme of Cāng Jié whom he presented as the *inventor* of writing:

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

<sup>5</sup> Xúnzǐ jíjiě 荀子集解 15 Jiě bì 解蔽, 1988:401.

固以(已)知之矣。(Hán Fēi zǐ xīn jiàozhù 49: 1105)

In ancient times, when Cāng Jié invented writing, he signified that which turns around itself by (the character) *sī* 私 'selfish, personal', and turning one's back against 'selfishness', he designated with (the character) *gōng* 公 'public'.<sup>6</sup> Cāng Jié must have known about the opposition between 'selfishness' and 'public'.

To show how opposed were the notions of 'public' and 'personal', Hán Fēi referred to the writing system evoking briefly he who had invented it and who had consciously reproduced this opposition in the very representations of the graphs. One can see here the idea of a profound correspondence between written signs and reality.<sup>7</sup>

In the *Lǚshì chūnqiū* (239 B.C.), under the patronage of Lǚ Bùwéi, Cāng Jié was also regarded as the inventor of writing. This time, together with Xīzhòng, Hòujì, Gāoyáo, Kūnwú and Gǔn of Xià, he was one of a group of six men whose inventions were outstanding.<sup>8</sup>

奚仲作車，蒼頡作書，后稷作稼，皋陶作刑，昆吾作陶，夏鯨作城，此六人者所作當矣，然而非主道者。(Shēn fēn lǎn 17: Jūn shǒu 審分覽：君守)<sup>9</sup>  
Xīzhòng invented the chariot, Cāng Jié writing, Hòujì plant cultivation, Gāoyáo corporal punishment, Kūnwú ceramic vessels, and Gǔn of Xià city walls. What these six men invented met needs, nonetheless they are not part of the Dao of ruling. (Knoblock 2000:413)

Just as for Xúnzǐ, writing retains its 'civilizing' role and Cāng Jié is only a man, but now he belongs in the category of inventors, those on whom a good ruler can depend for governing.

A bit later in the same chapter, the text mentions a list of 20 officials (*guān* 官) who assisted the ruler in governing, thanks to their inventions (of the 60-day cycle, of the calendar, of different forms of divination; of clothing; of bows; of the market; of fermented wine; of houses; of boats; of wells; of mortars for grinding grain, of the harness; of driving the chariots; of domesticating oxen; of charts; of medicinal treatments and divination stalks).<sup>10</sup> Among these, one finds a certain Shǐ Huáng 史皇 who was

<sup>6</sup> Hán Fēi relies on the 'ancient graph' *sī* 私, 'selfish, personal', which is more or less written like 厶, to show that the two graphs representing the words 'selfish, personal' and 'public' express this opposition of meanings in their graphic structure. According to Hán Fēi the graph for the word 'public' is built up from the components 'to turn one's back' and 'selfish, personal'.

<sup>7</sup> This perception of the script recalls the famous examples of the interpretation of graphs in the *Zuǒzhuàn* such as: "Thus from the graphic point of view, when one inverts 'correct' one obtains 'fall short'." (*Zuǒzhuàn* 24 *Xuān Gōng* 15, SSJZZ:1888a). See Bottéro 2004:15 *et seq.*

<sup>8</sup> Note that only the names of Cāng Jié and Hòujì are taken up from the *Xúnzǐ*.

<sup>9</sup> *Lǚshì chūnqiū jiào shì* 17, *Jūn shǒu* 君守:1051.

<sup>10</sup> *Lǚshì chūnqiū jiào shì* 19 *Wù gōng* 勿躬:1078.

described as the author of charts: 史皇作圖. Modern commentators identify Shǐ Huáng with Cāng Jié basing themselves on the fact that Gāo Yòu 高誘 (168-212), in his commentary on a passage of the *Huáinánzǐ* invoking Shǐ Huáng (see below), combined them together into a single person.<sup>11</sup> Yet neither their names nor their inventions ('charts' and 'writings', respectively) coincide with each other.<sup>12</sup> Indeed it is hard to see why it would be a matter of one and the same person.

As Chén Qíyóu has pointed out, this chapter of the *Lǚshì chūnqiū* presents theories of the so-called Legalist school. In other words, it is interesting to note that up to this time, the legend of Cāng Jié, inventor of writing, seems to have been confined to the milieu of the Legalist school, or at least to have been of interest only to them – which is certainly not contradicted by the next author we will consider.

Towards 213 B.C. Lǐ Sī 李斯 (c. 280-208), the minister of Qín Shǐ huángdì 秦始皇帝, wrote a 'manual of characters' in 7 sections, *Cāng Jié piān* 蒼頡篇,<sup>13</sup> in order to propagate his policy of unifying writing, which fell within a more general context of the suppression of regional particularisms. From the first sentence of his text, Lǐ Sī repeated the formula "Cāng Jié invented writing" 蒼頡作書. Unfortunately we do not have the full text of Lǐ Sī but, from manuscript fragments of the Hàn period - dating from 90 B.C. to 30 A.D. - that were discovered in Jūyán 居延 in the 1930s and, particularly, in the 1970s,<sup>14</sup> the subsequent text stated that writing was invented by Cāng Jié in order to provide instruction to later generations.

<sup>11</sup> See Chén Qíyóu and Mǎ Xùlún in *Lǚshì chūnqiū jiào shì*:1084, note 21. The legend of Cāng Jié, at the same time scribe of the Yellow Emperor and inventor of writing, was solidly established in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, with the result that, in his commentaries on the *Huáinánzǐ* and the *Lǚshì chūnqiū*, Gāo Yòu 高誘 (168-212) quite naturally associates Cāng Jié with Shǐ Huáng and describes him as a scribe of the Yellow Emperor.

<sup>12</sup> According to Mǎ Xùlún (*ibid*), *shū* 書 and *tú* 圖 represent the same thing. But Táng Lán (1979:52) observes that the famous sentence, 河出圖洛出書 "The Yellow River has produced the Charts and the Luò River the Writings", shows that these two terms had different meanings, see *infra*:147.

<sup>13</sup> The *Hànshū* 30:1719 and the *Shuōwén* 15A (*Shuōwén jiězì zhù* 15A 10a) say that Lǐ Sī's text was followed by Zhào Gāo's 趙高 *Yuánlì* 爰歷 in 6 sections, and by Húwú Jìng's 胡毋敬 *Bóxué* 博學 in 7 sections to form what was also called the *Cāng Jié piān* in 20 sections. During the Hàn time, the whole text was modified and expanded to 55 sections with 60 characters each. See Bottéro 2003:101 *et seq.*

<sup>14</sup> That is to say, along the Edsin gol river in western Mongolia, to the north of the Zhāngyē 張掖 and Jiǔquán 酒泉 districts, during the 1930 and 1972-76 archeological excavations. See Láo Gàn 1960:75 and *Wénwù* 1978 1:1-13.

蒼頡作書 以教後嗣 幼子承詔 謹慎敬戒 勉力諷誦  
 晝夜勿置 苟務成史 計會辯治 超等軼群 出尤別異居新  
 初雖勞苦 卒必有意 慤願忠信 密談言賞<sup>15</sup>

Cāng Jié invented writing to instruct the following generations. The young children politely receive instruction,<sup>16</sup> they are diligent and cautious, apply themselves to recitation and memorization, without resting day and night. If they want to serve and become scribes they will have to surpass the others in accountancy and administration, and it is by standing out in the crowd that they will be distinguished from the others. At the beginning it will be hard work, but in the end there will necessarily be gratifying satisfaction. Diligence, loyalty and discretion will be rewarded [...]<sup>17</sup>

Since the *Cāng Jié piān* was revised during the Hàn dynasty, we cannot be certain that this passage came only from the hand of Lǐ Sī. Nevertheless, the first sentence "Cāng Jié invented writing" provided the title that was registered in the *Hànshū*, and therefore, should not according to me be put into question. In other words, for Lǐ Sī as for Hán Fēi and the *Lǚshì chūnqiū*, Cāng Jié was clearly the inventor of writing.

As one can see in his well-known memorial to the Emperor Qín Shǐ huángdì,<sup>18</sup> Lǐ Sī explained how the scholars were denigrating the present, basing themselves on the ancient texts, and how threatening this was to the Emperor. Lǐ Sī here shows his ambivalent attitude towards writing. He feared what could be transmitted through writing, while at the same time using it to impose his law. He wanted to stop the scholars having recourse to the ancient texts,<sup>19</sup> by suppressing them or at least suppressing the most disturbing ones, namely *The Book of Odes*, *The Documents*, as well as *The Sayings of the Hundred Schools*.<sup>20</sup> Lǐ Sī was therefore aware that writing was a powerful tool of transmission, promoting critical reflection. But he also recognized it as an instrument for training those who would be able to serve the government. This is why, despite his radical laws, he would not prohibit

<sup>15</sup> See Hú Píngshēng 1996:33.

<sup>16</sup> In the postface of the *Shuōwén* (SWJZZ 15A 20b) Xǔ Shèn criticises mediocre scholars who pretend that the *Cāng Jié piān* was the work of an ancient emperor revealing magical powers, basing themselves on the sentence 幼子承詔 as meaning "The young son receives the imperial decree" (zhào 詔 being understood as gào 誥).

<sup>17</sup> It is not easy to understand this last part since the last four characters are missing.

<sup>18</sup> *Shǐjì* 6: 254 and 87: 2546.

<sup>19</sup> In Lǐ Sī's biography (*Shǐjì* 87: 2546), Sīmǎ Qiān adds a critical commentary on the confiscation of these texts: 始皇可其議，收去詩書百家之語以愚百姓，使天下無以古非今 "The First Emperor approved this proposal and accordingly confiscated and did away with the *Odes*, the *Documents*, and the *Sayings of the Hundred Schools* in order to make the common people ignorant and ensure that no-one in the empire used the past to criticize the present."

<sup>20</sup> As Sīmǎ Qiān 司馬遷 says (*Shǐjì* 6:255), the official histories other than those of the Qín were also suppressed.

writing since it was clearly an indispensable practice of his period and his policies,<sup>21</sup> and he encouraged those who wanted to study the law to take state functionaries as their masters, trained, at least in principle, in the graphic norm of the Qín<sup>22</sup> (already used by the State of Qín before 221 B.C.).<sup>23</sup>

A little less than a century later, in the *Huáinánzǐ* 淮南子 (139 B.C.), Cāng Jié was still considered the inventor of writing, but his invention had created some curious phenomena:

昔者蒼頡作書而天雨粟，鬼夜哭；伯益作井而龍登玄雲，神棲崑崙；能愈多而德愈薄矣。

In ancient times, when Cāng Jié invented writing, Heaven rained down millet and ghosts wailed at night; when Bóyì invented wells, dragons climbed up to the dark clouds and demons made their home in Kūnlún. The more that knowledge increased, the less concern was shown for inner virtue.<sup>24</sup>

Strangely, it was not men themselves who were worried about the invention of writing but the ghosts. The relationship between the ghosts and writing is particularly interesting. The fact that they were disturbed by the invention of writing, just as the dragons (who lived in the valleys) were troubled by the digging of wells, suggests that writing had a certain power over them or at least intruded on their territory. Different interpretations of these phenomena have been proposed.<sup>25</sup> According to Gāo Yòu, the ghosts started crying

<sup>21</sup> The civil and judicial administration of the Qín is known for its high level of development and for having therefore led to a much more rapid graphic style *lishū* 隸書 (SWJZZ 15A 10b). As Jacques Gernet has noted: "Dans l'administration, c'est par le recours à l'écrit (rapports de gestion, inventaires, états quotidiens...), aux calculs, aux modes de preuves objectifs (sceaux, insignes en deux parties dont le rapprochement suffit, par la coïncidence des marques, à révéler l'authenticité) que doit être assurée la stricte exécution des ordres." (*Le monde chinois* 1972:88).

<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, as noted by Bān Gù (*Hànshū*:1721) and Xǔ Shèn (SWJZZ 15A 13b), the original text of Lǐ Sī presented many ancient graphs, which would mean that Lǐ Sī's reform would not have been so radical as had been claimed.

<sup>23</sup> This policy certainly encouraged the teaching of the Chinese writing. The fact that several fragments of the *Cāng Jié piān* have been found in both the north-west (near Dūnhuáng and western Inner Mongolia (cf. Fukuda Tetsuyuki 1993) as well as in the south of China (in a tomb in the Ānhuī province, dating from 165 B.C. (see Hú Píngshēng and Hán Zìqiáng 1983, and also Fukuda Tetsuyuki 1989) confirms the very widespread use of this text throughout the whole territory of China, at least during the Hàn period.

<sup>24</sup> Zhāng Shuāngdì 張雙棣 *Huáinánzǐ jiàoshì* 1997, ch. 8 *Běn jīng xùn* 本經訓:828.

<sup>25</sup> As we will see later (see *infra*:147), Wáng Chōng denies, for example, the causal relationship (*Lùnhéng jiàoshì* 19 *Gǎn xū piān* 感虛篇:249-50), and suggests that it was perhaps the *qì* 氣, which, through its ability to imitate human forms and sounds, was able to make people believe in the wailing of ghosts (*Lùnhéng jiàoshì* 65 *Dìng guǐ piān* 訂鬼篇:940-41). While Gāo Yòu (in a commentary attributed to him, although some attribute it to Xǔ Shèn, cf. Acker 1954:63 note 1, see below) explained them in the following way: 蒼頡始視鳥

during the night because they "feared they would be impeached".<sup>26</sup> But it is hard to see why the ghosts would be impeached by written documents and why this would not also affect men.

As Anna Seidel has emphasized, the representation of demons and the fact of calling them by their names were ways used long before the Hàn dynasty to keep them at bay and would become a central concern in Taoism. The invention of writing could therefore have played an apotropaic role, equivalent to that of certain images used to ward off the demons.<sup>27</sup> But even if, as Anna Seidel has pointed out, the list of gods or of demons found in the famous Hàn Apocrypha texts, *Chènwěi* 讖緯, must have made the demons howl, it is surely not simply because of writing them. I think it is rather the fact of naming them or reciting their names that first gave men power over them and helped keep the demons at a distance. In other words, these forms of defense against the demons were not strictly speaking the prerogative of writing. This is why I think we have to look for an explanation which is

---

跡之文，造書契，則詐偽萌生。詐偽萌生則去本趨末，廢耕作之業而務錐刀之利。天知其將餓，故為雨粟。鬼恐為書文所劾，故夜哭也 (*Huáinánzǐ jiàoshì* 1997:831, note 13)

"Ts'ang Chieh, upon observing the patterns to the tracks of birds, invented written documents, whereupon deceit and artifice sprouted forth. Once deceit and artifice had sprouted forth, people ignored the basics and busied themselves with the peripheral. They gave up the occupation of farming and turned their attention instead to the gains from awl and blade. Heaven knew of their impending hunger, and so made it 'rain millet' for them. Ghosts feared they would be impeached by written records, so they 'wailed in the night'" (translated by William Boltz 1994:132). In the text of the *Lidài míngshùjì* 歷代明書記 of the Táng (847), Zhāng Yányuǎn 張彥遠 explained these phenomena in the following way: 靈怪不能遁其形故鬼夜哭 "Supernatural beings could no longer hide their shapes, therefore the demons howled at night" (translation by Acker 1954:63). It seems to me that this interpretation of the demons' fear is due to some typographical errors that slipped into Gāo Yòu's commentary (attributed to Xǔ Shèn by William Acker (1954:63 note 1): 鬼恐為書又所劾 "The demons feared that they also might be engraved in books" instead of: 鬼恐為書文所劾 "Ghosts feared they would be impeached by written records." As Boltz has pointed out, since some time before the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the commentaries of Gāo Yòu and Xǔ Shèn were merged, it is difficult to know what came from Gāo Yòu and what came from Xǔ Shèn. However, we can note that, in the postface of the *Shuōwén* (SWJZZ 15A 1b, see *infra*:14-15), Xǔ Shèn had a somewhat different vision of things, since he included, for example, the marks left by animal paws as well as birds' feet, and considered that the consequences of the invention of writing were on the whole positive since this made the administration of society possible. Gāo Yòu (*ibid*) also proposed another interpretation when *tù* 兔 'hare' is a textual variant for *guǐ* 鬼 'ghost': hares, being afraid that their pelts would be used to make brushes and that their lives would then be taken away from them, started wailing at night. Finally, we could ask ourselves whether the name of Cāng 倉, which means 'granary' or 'to be engaged in storing grain', did not simply suggest this idea of the raining of grain.

<sup>26</sup> See William Boltz's translation in the preceding note.

<sup>27</sup> Anna Seidel (1983:320) (also discussed by Boltz, 1994:133) mentions the famous example of the *Zuǒzhuàn* 21 *Xuān Gōng* 3 (SSJZZ:1868b) with the nine tripods on which strange creatures were represented in order for the people to protect themselves from them.

closer to the particularities of writing. Writing is by its very nature permanent, as opposed to speech (which is effective in the immediate present), but writing is also capable of recalling what is no longer present, or of hiding what is present. These elements result in writing having a subtle relationship with the invisible world. One can ask if it is not through its interaction with the ancestors, the facts about whom and whose actions one can later read about, and with the descendants to whom, for instance, wishes can be transmitted, that writing would not encroach on the world of ghosts and would thereby confer on the world of the living a power over the world of the beyond.<sup>28</sup>

In any case, we see here an original idea of the consequences of the invention of writing which differs from those proposed by previous authors and which is all the more interesting for betraying an approach that freely incorporates popular beliefs, to which we are so partial.

In another chapter (19 *Xiū wù xùn* 修務訓) of *Huáinánzǐ*, Liú Ān 劉安 (c. 179-122) refers to Cāng Jié but also to Shǐ Huáng. Cāng Jié remains the one who invented writing:

昔者，蒼頡作書，容成造曆，胡曹為衣，后稷耕稼，儀狄作酒，奚仲為車。此六人者，皆有神明之道，聖智之跡，故人作一事而遺後世，非能一人而獨兼有之。<sup>29</sup>

In ancient times, Cāng Jié invented writing, Róng Chéng created the calendar system; Hú Cáo made clothes, Hòujì ploughed and sowed seeds; Yí Dī invented alcohol, and Xìzhōng constructed chariots.

Meanwhile Shǐ Huáng is described, a bit earlier in the text, as someone who was able to write as soon as he was born: 史皇產而能書。<sup>30</sup> In contrast to the sentence of the *Lǚshì chūnqiū*, mentioned earlier (史皇作圖), here the character *tú* 圖 'charts' was replaced by *shū* 書 'writing', which, however, designates a completely different reality. Moreover, here it is not a question of invention but innate knowledge.<sup>31</sup> This did not stop Gāo Yòu in his commentary from identifying Shǐ Huáng with Cāng Jié and adding that he was called by this name (Scribe Huáng) because he knew how to write down

<sup>28</sup> If, on the other hand, ancestors or ghosts alone could use all sorts of (written) signs to communicate with the world of the living, the invention of writing would change the situation and make men intrude on their territory.

<sup>29</sup> Zhāng Shuāngdì, *Huáinánzǐ jiàoshì* 1997, ch. 19 *Xiū wù xùn* 修務訓:1982.

<sup>30</sup> Zhāng Shuāngdì 張雙棣 *Huáinánzǐ jiàoshì* 1997, ch. 19 *Xiū wù xùn* 修務訓:1979.

<sup>31</sup> Note that Shǐ Huáng is presented in this passage with other heroes either born in a marvellous way or possessing extraordinary features.



texts.<sup>32</sup> Since the names of Cāng Jié and Shǐ Huáng appear in the same chapter, it is possible that there were two traditions for explaining the invention of writing in this period: one presenting Shǐ Huáng as knowing how to write at birth; the other attributing the invention of writing to Cāng Jié – unless *shū* 書 'writing' is a mistake for *huà* 畫 'drawing'.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, a third mention of Cāng Jié in the *Huáinánzǐ* is just as interesting because it promotes the role of writing:

蒼頡之初作書也，以辯治百官<sup>34</sup>，領理萬事，愚者得以不忘，智者得以志遠。(《Huáinánzǐ jiàoshì》1997, ch. 20 *Tài zú xùn* 泰族訓: 2059)

When Cāng Jié first invented writing, it was used to govern the officials, to lead and to organise all undertakings. With it the simple-minded were able not to forget, and wise men were able to record distant history.

Writing makes government possible, but it goes beyond this pure administrative function since it allows people lacking talents to keep a memory of (recent) things and those who are talented to recall ancient events, present them and possibly inspire others. The *Huáinánzǐ* here elaborates an original idea about the different personal use of writing and widens our horizon of the conceptions of writing during this era.

We now need to mention the *Shiběn* 世本, a work that has unfortunately been lost since the Sòng dynasty, but which was said to contain 15 chapters and was used by Sīmǎ Qiān in the compilation of his *Shǐjì*.<sup>35</sup> Several authors mention it, for example the six we will consider here.

a) Jiǎ Gōngyán 賈公彥 (7<sup>th</sup> century) mentions it in his commentary on the *Zhōulǐ Wàishǐ* 周禮外史: 世本作云蒼頡造文字<sup>36</sup> "The chapter on the inventions of the *Shiběn* says: Cāng Jié created writing".

b) In the first chapter of the *Guǎngyùn* 廣韻 (1011 A.D.),<sup>37</sup> one finds under the character *shū* 書 the following citation: 世本曰沮誦蒼頡作書 "The *Shiběn* says: Jǔ Sòng and Cāng Jié invented writing"; and there is

<sup>32</sup> *Huáinánzǐ jiàoshì* 1997:1979, note 42: 史皇，蒼頡。生而見鳥跡，知著書，故曰史皇，或曰頡皇。It is remarkable that Xǔ Shèn who also wrote a commentary on the *Huáinánzǐ* does not mention Shǐ Huáng in the postface of the *Shuōwén*.

<sup>33</sup> This is suggested by Táng Lán (1979:53), basing himself on a quotation of the *Shiběn* 世本 supposedly taken from the *Yìwén lèijù* 藝文類聚 of the Táng and mentioning the invention of the drawings by the scribe Shǐ Huáng: 史皇作畫, but I could not find this quotation!

<sup>34</sup> Compare with Xǔ Shèn's text and the *Xìcí*, cf. infra:15

<sup>35</sup> See *Hànshū* 30, *Yìwénzhì*:1714 and *Hànshū* 62:2737.

<sup>36</sup> *Shísānjīng zhùshù*, 1980:820C.

<sup>37</sup> *Xīnjiào Sòng běn Guǎngyùn*, Táiběi: Hóngyè wénhuà 洪葉文化, 2001, *shàng píng* 上平, rhyme 9 *yú* 魚:66 and 68.

almost the same passage under the character 沮: 世本云沮誦蒼頡作書。

c) In the 57<sup>th</sup> chapter of the *Wénxuǎn* 文選 (6<sup>th</sup> century), we find in the commentary of the Eulogy *Sòng Xiàowǔ Xuān Guǐfēi lěi* 宋孝武宣貴妃誄 the following line: 世本曰: 史皇作圖 "The *Shiběn* says: Shǐ Huáng invented pictorial representation", with (2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> centuries) Sòng Zhōng's explanations: 宋衷曰: 史皇、黃帝臣也、圖謂畫物象也<sup>38</sup> "Sòng Zhōng says: Shǐ Huáng was Huángdì's minister; *tú* means to draw creatures and images".

d) According to Táng Lán (1979: 53), the *Yìwén lèijù* 藝文類聚 (625 A.D.) includes the following sentence from the *Shiběn*: 史皇作畫 "Shǐ Huáng invented drawings", but I personally have not been able to locate this quotation.

e) Kǒng Yǐngdá 孔穎達 (574-648), in his commentary on the preface to the *Shàngshū* which was written by Kǒng Ānguó 孔安國,<sup>39</sup> considered that the idea of Cāng Jié being the inventor of writing came from the chapter on "The inventions" *Zuòpiān* 作篇 of the *Shiběn* and he quotes: 世本始皇作圖, 倉頡作書 "According to the *Shiběn*, Shǐ Huáng invented charts (or pictorial representation) and Cāng Jié invented writing".

f) Finally, in the 235<sup>th</sup> chapter of the *Tàipíng yùlǎn* 太平御覽 of the Sòng, one finds again the same citation as in the *Wénxuǎn*, with the same commentary by Sòng Zhōng: 世本曰、史皇作圖。宋衷注: 史皇、黃帝臣也、圖謂畫物象也。<sup>40</sup>

The *Shiběn* therefore presented Cāng Jié as the inventor of writing,<sup>41</sup> and Shǐ Huáng as the inventor of the *tú* 'charts' or 'pictorial representation' (and possibly of the *huà* 'drawings'), but clearly not of the *shū* 'writing'. Note that in the *Guǎngyùn*, another protagonist Jǔ Sòng 沮誦 is accredited with inventing writing with Cāng Jié.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>38</sup> See Xiāo Tǒng 1931, *Wénxuǎn* 57, vol 11:103.

<sup>39</sup> *Shísānjīng zhùshù*, 1980:113b.

<sup>40</sup> *Tàipíng yùlǎn*, 1960, vol 2:1114 (235, 4a).

<sup>41</sup> It is probably the sentence 蒼頡造文字 that was the original formulation in the *Shiběn* since the expression *wénzì* did not become common until the *Shuōwén jiězì* (Bottéro 2004:21).

<sup>42</sup> Jǔ Sòng 沮誦 is also mentioned in the *Fēngsútōng* 風俗通 (c. 200 A.D.) of Yīng Shào 應邵. This text is quoted in the *Hòu Hànshū* (9:379, see also note 3) in the following passage about Jǔ Jùn 沮儁: "The *Fēngsútōng* 風俗通 says: "Jǔ 沮 is a clan name. Jǔ Jùn was a descendant of the scribe Jǔ Sòng 沮誦 of the Yellow Emperor." Wèi Héng 衛恆 (3<sup>rd</sup> century) also quotes Jǔ Sòng in his *Sìtǐshū shì* 四體書勢: 昔在黃帝, 創製造物。有沮誦, 蒼頡者始作書契以代結繩, 蓋睹鳥跡以興思也。"In the past, during Huángdì's time, basic rules were established and things created. There were Jǔ Sòng and Cāng Jié who first invented writing and (written) contracts to replace knotted ropes." In other words, Jǔ Sòng 沮誦 should not

*Cāng Jié 蒼頡, the scribe of Huángdì 黃帝, the Yellow Emperor*

The association between Cāng Jié and 'the Yellow Emperor', Huángdì 黃帝 dates from the Hàn period.<sup>43</sup> Wáng Chōng 王充 (27-97) refers several times (22 times) to Cāng Jié in his *Lùnhéng*.<sup>44</sup> He first introduces him by way of secondary literary sources, certainly not studied by the scholars, but in which Cāng Jié had been described as a person possessing four eyes and consequently occupying the function of scribe for the Yellow Emperor.<sup>45</sup> In chapters 15 and 49, Wáng Chōng returns to the idea that when Cāng Jié invented writing, he modeled the characters from reality.<sup>46</sup> But when the written names assigned to legendary heroes such as *jī* 姬 fail to correspond to events depicting their birth, Wáng Chōng questions the legends surrounding the heroes rather than criticizing the characters used to name them:

失道之意，還反其字。蒼頡作書，與事相連。姜原履大人跡。跡者基也，姓當為其下土，乃為女旁臣，非基跡之字，不合本事，疑非實也。  
(*Lùnhéng jiàoshì* 15 *Qí guài piān* 奇怪篇:163)

With ideas that 'lose the way' we should return to the written words. When Cāng Jié invented writing, he related it to events. Jiāng Yuán walked on the giant's footprints. 'Footprint' refers to 'basis', the clan name therefore ought to be '其' with '土' below [that is *jī* 基]. But the character with the 'woman' component and *yí* '臣' [*jī* 姬] is neither the character *jī* 'basis' nor *jì* 'footprint'; since it does not correspond with the original event, I suspect it is not the reality.

As other authors cited earlier, Wáng Chōng on four occasions associates Cāng Jié with Xīzhòng 奚仲, the inventor of the chariot (chapters 36, 46,<sup>47</sup>

have been prior to the Hàn. According to Táng Lán (1979:52), Jǔ Sòng 沮誦 represented Zhù Sòng 祝誦, which is another name for Zhù Róng 祝融.

<sup>43</sup> According to Kaizuka Shigeki (1981:5), Hán Fēi 韓非 is the first philosopher to mention Huángdì 黃帝 the 'Yellow Emperor', but he did not associate Cāng Jié with the 'Yellow Emperor'.

<sup>44</sup> *Lùnhéng* 論衡 chapters 11, 15, 18, 19, 36, 38, 46, 49, 55, 65, 70 and 84.

<sup>45</sup> *Lùnhéng jiàoshì* 11 *Gǔ xiāng piān* 骨相篇:112: 若夫短書俗記竹帛胤文，非儒者所見，眾多非一。蒼頡四目，為黃帝史 "As far as the secondary records and common books written on bamboo and silk are concerned – these are not what scholars read and they are quite numerous – Cāng Jié had four eyes and became the scribe of the Yellow Emperor."

<sup>46</sup> 夫蟲，風氣所生，蒼頡知之，故〈凡〉〈蟲〉為〈風〉之字 (*Lùnhéng jiàoshì* 49 *Shāng chóng piān* 商蟲篇:715) "Now insects are the product of the (vital) energy *qì* of the wind. Cāng Jié knew it, therefore he formed the character 'wind' with (the components) *fán* 'all' and *chóng* 'insect.'" One finds again here an ancient vision of the characters and their graphic interpretation that was already present in the *Zuǒzhàn* but also, as we have seen, in the *Hánfēizǐ*, cf. *supra* note 7.

<sup>47</sup> *Lùnhéng jiàoshì* 46 *Shùn gǔ piān* 順鼓篇:691.

55 and 84):

吏居城郭，出乘車馬，坐治文書；起城郭，何王？造車輿，何工？生馬，何地？作書，何人（王）？造城郭及馬所生，難知也，遠也。造車作書，易曉也，必將應曰：倉頡作書，奚仲作車。詰曰：倉頡何感而作書？奚仲何起而作車？又不知也。文吏所當知，然而不知，亦不博覽之過也。  
(*Lùnhéng jiàoshì* 36 *Xiè duǎn piān* 謝短篇:576)

State employees live inside the city walls, ride in chariots when going out, and cope with documents when sitting. Which king first built city walls? Which artisan first made chariots? Where was the place for first breeding horses? And who invented writing? It is difficult to know who first built city walls, and where horses were first bred, for it is too far in the past. It is easy to know, who invented chariots, and who invented writing, hence one will certainly reply: "Cāng Jié invented writing, and Xīzhòng invented the chariot." But if one goes on to ask: "What inspired Cāng Jié to invent writing, and what incited Xīzhòng to invent the chariot?", one again does not know. These are what the civil officials should know, but do not know, and it is also the officials' fault not to extend their own knowledge.

In other words Wáng Chōng considers that the invention of writing, like that of chariots, did not go back as far as the building of the city walls and the domestication of animals. The fact that he asks himself what could have triggered the invention of writing is particularly interesting. But he answers this question later, in chapter 55 *Gǎn lèi piān*:

以見鳥跡而知為書，見蜚蓬而知為車，天非以鳥跡命倉頡，以蜚蓬使奚仲也。奚仲感蜚蓬，而倉頡起鳥跡也。( *Lùnhéng jiàoshì* 55 *Gǎn lèi piān* 感類篇: 800)

It is through the observation of bird's footprints that [Cāng Jié] understood how to form writing, and it is through the observation of *Fěi péng* flowers that Xīzhòng understood how to make chariots. Heaven did not use bird's footprints to command Cāng Jié, nor *Fěi péng* flowers to order Xīzhòng; it is Xīzhòng who was touched by *Fěi péng* flowers and it is Cāng Jié who was inspired by bird's footprints.

In chapter 84, the author of the *Lùnhéng* indicates clearly that the role of writing is to record the facts:

倉頡之書，世以紀事，奚仲之車，世以自載。( *Lùnhéng jiàoshì* 84 *Duì zuò piān* 對作篇:1184)

The writing (invented by) Cāng Jié has been used by people to record events, the chariot (invented by) Xīzhòng has been used by people to transport themselves.

Wáng Chōng also repeats the story, already described in the *Huáinánzǐ*, of the raining of grain and of the ghosts wailing at night following the invention

of writing by Cāng Jié (ch. 18,<sup>48</sup> 19, 65). He uses this story to criticize the supposed causal relationships. The traditional explanation was that disorder appeared with the invention of writing. But the invention of writing by Cāng Jié was not really different from the creation of *the Charts* and *the Writings* by Heaven and Earth, and these were considered as beneficial events. So there was a contradiction in thinking of the invention of writing as something negative. If it is true that grain had rained down and that the ghosts howled at night, it is certainly, for Wáng Chōng, a matter of chance that these events were co-incidental with the invention of writing. But it is also quite possible that it was the vital energies *qì* which, through their ability to imitate human forms and sounds, could have convinced men to believe that the ghosts had wailed at night.<sup>49</sup>

傳書言：倉頡作書，天雨粟，鬼夜哭。此言文章興而亂漸見，故其妖變，致天雨粟、鬼夜哭也。夫見天雨粟、鬼夜哭，實也。言其應倉頡作書，虛也。夫河出圖，洛出書，聖帝明王之瑞應也。圖書文章與倉頡所作字畫（書）何以異？天地為圖書，倉頡作文字，業與天地同，指與鬼神合，何非何惡，而致雨粟神哭之怪？使天地鬼神惡人有書，則其出圖書，非也；天不惡人有書，作書何非而致此怪？或時倉頡適作書，天適雨粟，鬼偶夜哭，而雨粟、鬼神哭自有所為。世見應書而至，則謂作書生亂敗之象，應事而動也。（*Lùnhéng jiàoshì* 19 *Gǎn xū piān* 感虛篇:249-250)

The transmitted texts say that when Cāng Jié invented writing, Heaven rained down grain, and ghosts wailed at night. This is to say that as soon as writings flourished, disorder began to gradually appear. Hence the evil prodigies, which caused Heaven to rain down grain and ghosts to wail at night. Now, that Heaven rained down grain and ghosts wailed at night, that is true enough. But to say that [such phenomena] came in reaction to Cāng Jié's invention of writing, that is a falsehood. Now, the Yellow River produced the *Charts*, and the *Luò* River produced the *Writings*. These are auspicious signs that come in response to sage emperors and enlightened kings. How were the texts of *the Charts* and *the Writings* and the documents with the characters invented by Cāng Jié any different? Heaven and Earth made the *Charts* and *Writings*; Cāng Jié invented the characters. His deeds were the same as those of Heaven and Earth, which

<sup>48</sup> 論說之家著於書記者皆云 天雨穀者凶。書傳曰蒼頡作書，天雨穀，鬼夜哭。此方凶惡之應和者，天何用成穀之道（*Lùnhéng jiàoshì* 18 *Yì xū piān* 異虛篇:221）"Those among the experts in discourse who write in books all say: 'For Heaven to rain down grain is inauspicious'. The written traditions say: 'When Cāng Jié invented writing, Heaven rained down grain, and the ghosts wailed at night.' As to this response, perfectly in accordance with an evil event, why would Heaven employ a method with ripened grain?"

<sup>49</sup> 及倉頡作書，鬼夜哭。氣能象人聲而哭，則亦能象人形而見，則人以為鬼（*Lùnhéng jiàoshì* 65 *Dìng guǐ piān* 訂鬼篇:940-41）"And when Cāng Jié invented writing, the ghosts wailed at night. Since vital energies *qì* have the ability to imitate human sounds and cry, and also have the ability to imitate human shapes and become visible, people believed that it was the ghosts that had wailed at night."

means that he was in accord with the spirits. What wrong, what evil was there, to cause evil prodigies such as the raining of grain and the howling of spirits? If the spirits of Heaven and Earth had not wanted humans to have writing, then it was wrong of them to produce *the Charts* and *the Writings*. And if Heaven did not mind that humans had writing, what evil was there in the invention of writing that would bring about such an evil prodigy? Perhaps, at that time, right when Cāng Jié invented writing, Heaven happened to rain down grain and the ghosts, by chance, wailed at night. But such phenomena have their own causes. People at that time, considering that they occurred in response to writing[*s invention*], then said that they were a sign of the chaos engendered by the invention of writing, that they were acts in response to events.

Wáng Chōng finally refers to the manual of characters that is called *Cāng Jié* and the books of *ars minor*,<sup>50</sup> and tells us on which day Cāng Jié died:

又學書（者）偉丙日，云倉頡以丙日死也（*Lùnhéng jiàoshì 70 Jī rì piān 譏日篇:995-996*）

Moreover, those who study the writings consider the *bǐng* days taboo, and say: Cāng Jié died on a *bǐng* day.

Drawing from secondary literary sources Wáng Chōng provides us with a great deal of information about Cāng Jié, even more extensive than the preceding authors. He enables us to get a clearer idea of the legend of Cāng Jié as it existed in the 1<sup>st</sup> century of our era and to understand how it had developed: Cāng Jié became the scribe of the Yellow Emperor; he had been inspired by the marks left behind by birds to invent writing; and he was assigned a specific day to commemorate his death. Finally, according to what some said, he even had four eyes. As for writing, this was seen as a means of recording events and remained tied to symbolizing reality.

A few years later, in the *Shuōwén jǐèzì* (100 A.D.), Cāng Jié was confirmed in his function of scribe of the Yellow Emperor, but Xǔ Shèn incorporated him in a well-defined chronological sequence. We learn that Páo Xī 庖犧 first invented the trigrams; then that knotted ropes were used for governing, during the time of Shén Nóng; and that it was subsequent to this that Cāng Jié invented writing.

古者庖犧氏之王天下也。仰則觀象於天，俯則觀法於地。視鳥獸之文與地之宜。近取諸身遠取諸物。於是始作易八卦。<sup>51</sup>以垂憲象。及神農氏結繩為治。而統其事。庶業其繁飾偽萌生。黃帝之史倉頡見鳥獸之足虎迹之跡知

<sup>50</sup> *Lùnhéng jiàoshì 19 Bié tōng piān 別通篇:603*: 夫倉頡之章，小學之書，文字備具 "The *Cāng Jié* chapter is a text for learning how to write, in which all the characters have been included."

<sup>51</sup> As I will mention it below, this passage is taken from the *Yijīng Xìcí (Shísānjīng zhùshù: 86b)*.

分理之相別異也。初造書契。百工以乂[治]。萬品以察。蓋取諸夬。〈夬：揚于王庭〉<sup>52</sup>言文者宣教明化於王者朝廷。〈君子所以施祿及下。居德則忌〉<sup>53</sup>也。(SWJZZ 15A 1a-2a)

In ancient times when Páo Xī ruled over the world, looking up, he contemplated the images in the sky, and looking down, he observed the laws on the earth. He observed the markings on birds and beasts and their adaptation to their environment. Close to him, he was inspired by his own person; at a distance, he was inspired by all creatures. Then, he first created the Eight Trigrams of The *Changes* to transmit the aspects of the Laws (of the Universe). Later, Shén Nóng used knotted ropes to govern and administer state affairs. Professional occupations proliferated, ornaments and artefacts began to develop. Cāng Jié, the scribe of the Yellow Emperor, observing the traces left by the feet and paws of birds and beasts, understood that they could be differentiated by their distinctive principles. He invented writing and (written) contracts. Officials could be governed and products could be controlled. He probably derived this from the *guài* hexagram. "*Guài*: exhibit at the royal court" means that it is the written texts that transmit the teachings [of the ancients] and manifest education at the king's court. "It is the means by which benefits dispensed by the gentleman reach those below. When one acts according to virtue one observes what is forbidden."

Whereas the first paragraph is taken from the *Yijing Xici*, Xǔ Shèn has his own way of elaborating the story. In the *Xici*, it was Páo Xī or Fú Xī who invented knotted ropes to make nets for hunting and fishing and it was Shén Nóng who used them for governing. But it was the Sages of antiquity who replaced the knotted ropes with writing:

古者包犧氏之王天下也。仰則觀象於天，俯則觀法於地。觀鳥獸之文與地之宜。近取諸身遠取諸物。於是始作八卦。以通神明之德，以類萬物之情。作結繩而為罔罟以佃以漁。蓋取諸離。<sup>54</sup> [...] 上古結繩而治。後世聖人易之以書契。百官以治。萬民以察。蓋取諸夬。<sup>55</sup>

In ancient times when Páo Xī ruled over the world, looking up, he contemplated the images in the sky, and looking down, he observed the laws on the earth. He observed the markings on birds and beasts and their adaptation to their environment. Close to him, he was inspired by his own person, at a distance, he was inspired by all creatures. Then, he first created the Eight Trigrams to communicate with the powers of spiritual enlightenment and to imitate the nature of the myriad creatures. He invented knotted ropes to make nets for hunting and fishing. He probably derived this from the *lí* hexagram. [...] In high antiquity, people used knotted ropes to govern. Later on Sages replaced them with writing and (written) contracts. Officials could be governed and the people could be controlled. He probably derived this from the *guài* hexagram.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. *Yijing 'guài'*, SSJZS:56c.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* In the *Yijing* the text is slightly different: 君子以施祿及下。居德則忌。

<sup>54</sup> *Yijing Xici* B, SSJZS:86b.

<sup>55</sup> *Yijing Xici* B, SSJZS:87b.

The text of the *Xìcí* does not specify which of the Sages of antiquity had replaced the knotted ropes with writing, but Xǔ Shèn declares that it was Cāng Jié, the scribe of Huángdì, who had invented them<sup>56</sup>. Besides, Xǔ Shèn proceeded to explain how Cāng Jié first had the idea of writing: whereas Fú Xī had been inspired by the markings on beasts' and birds' bodies to create the eight trigrams, Cāng Jié himself was inspired by the traces they left on the ground.<sup>57</sup> In other words, in his postface, Xǔ Shèn shows that Cāng Jié modeled his ideas on Fú Xī to create writing and that, as with the trigrams and knotted ropes, writing was used for governing.<sup>58</sup>

As for all the inventions enumerated in the *Xìcí*, writing was inspired by a hexagram: *guài*. Xǔ Shèn adheres to the idea that the *Changes* were at the origin of all the inventions that are fundamental for the culture. He falls under the tradition of the *Xìcí*, but also elaborates on the origin of writing in his own way, since too little had been said about it. Just as stated in the *Huáinánzǐ*, the *Yijing Xìcí* (SSJZS:87b), or in the *Hànshū* (30:1720), Xǔ Shèn asserts that writing made administration possible, but he insists on the fact that the texts allow the propagation of the teachings of the ancients, the enlightenment of the court and the cultivation of moral integrity – What absolute faith in the transmitted texts!

His originality, compared to earlier authors, is that he advances the idea of writing as trace: traces left by birds, as Wáng Chōng had already said, but also and above all, traces of the past and traces for future generations:

蓋文字者經藝之本。王政之始。前人所以垂後，後人所以識古。<sup>59</sup>

It would appear that written characters are the foundation of the Classics and the Arts, and the beginning of the royal Government. It is the means by which old generations transmit to younger generations and younger generations know the old generations.

Finally, and most significantly, the author of *Shuōwén* goes much further

<sup>56</sup> Note that in the *Hànshū* (30:1720), Bān Gù who is known to have based his *Treatise on Literature* on Liú Xīn 劉歆's catalogue of the imperial library gives exactly the same sentence from the *Yijing Xìcí* (cf. above note 55). But unlike Xǔ Shèn, Bān Gù does not say who invented writing. Therefore Xǔ Shèn who was indirectly Liú Xīn's disciple obviously innovated here by presenting Cāng Jié as modeling his ideas on Fú Xī and inventing writing. According to Xú Kǎi (說文解字繫傳 29, 1b-2a, 1987:285-286), Xǔ Shèn indicated who used the knotted ropes and which Sage invented writing because the *Yijing* stated that at the death of Fú Xī, Shén Nóng replaced him and that when the latter died, it was Huángdì who succeeded him. But in fact Xǔ Shèn says much more about this than the *Xìcí*.

<sup>57</sup> In other words, this looks like a reply to the question asked by Wáng Chōng in chapter 36: 倉頡何感而作書 quoted above:146.

<sup>58</sup> This is confirmed later in the postface (SWJZZ 15A 21b), see the translated text below corresponding to the note 59.

<sup>59</sup> See *Shuōwén* (SWJZZ 15A 21b).



and describes the historical process of the creation of written words:

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 Cāng Jié 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* 'written words'. (SWJZZ 15A 2a)

In this very significant passage that is usually poorly interpreted,<sup>60</sup> Xǔ Shèn explains that there were initially simple graphic representations, before language could be recorded. In other words, sketches of reality preceded the writing of words to describe this reality. And it was by associating a word in the spoken language to each of these images that writing came to record the language.

### Conclusion

Cāng Jié was definitively proclaimed as the inventor of writing by the disciples of Xúnzǐ, and soon became the scribe of the Yellow Emperor, inspired by the traces left by birds, as we have learned from Wáng Chōng and Xǔ Shèn. We could pursue the search for information about Cāng Jié through the subsequent centuries, but we would not learn much from this. We would obviously see that there were conflicting views on the dates to assign to Cāng Jié: whether he lived before or after Fú Xī.<sup>61</sup> But Xǔ Shèn's postface already allows us to understand this, since he imposed a strict chronology and suggested that Cāng Jié used Fú Xī as his model for inventing writing. We would also see in later texts that there were certainly different schools attributing the invention of writing to different persons: Cāng Jié, Shǐ Huáng, Jǔ Sòng. Here again we can infer this from the fact that these names appeared before Xǔ Shèn, but Xǔ Shèn only retained one of them: Cāng Jié. Moreover the author of the *Shuōwén jiězì* also provides us with a tangible way of creating characters: observing nature and the indices it reveals to those who know how to see them.

According to the documents which we have access to, the question of the

---

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Bottéro 2004.

<sup>61</sup> This is what Kǒng Yǐngdá writes in his commentary to the preface to the *Shàngshū*, SSJZS: 113b. Generally, as the centuries advanced, Cāng Jié was considered to have lived at an increasingly early period, receding further into time immemorial. Indeed, according to Cài Yōng 蔡邕 (132-192) or Cáo Zhí 曹植 (192-232), Cāng Jié was a king in ancient times, and according to Zhāng Yī 張揖 (3<sup>rd</sup> century), he went back 276,000 years. Note however that Shèn Dào 慎到 (350[?]-275[?]) had already considered him as predating Páo Xī: 倉頡在庖犧之前.

origin of writing did not go further back than the 3<sup>rd</sup> century before our era. And this is perhaps not by chance. Firstly because a more personal practice of the act of writing was needed to understand its importance; but secondly, because any reflection on writing would have been inconceivable without the need to also question its role and place in society and government.<sup>62</sup> More than any others, the 'legalist' Hán Fēi and Lǐ Sī seem to have satisfied these conditions and to have understood the importance of writing: the former quite likely for physical reasons (he was a stutterer),<sup>63</sup> the latter for political reasons (the need to control all the conquered territories). But it is in the *Huáinánzǐ* that the role of writing seems for the first time to have been explicitly defined in terms of personal use as well as administrative usefulness. The idea that writing allows the functioning of the government was then developed by Xǔ Shèn who insisted on the importance of the texts and the teachings they convey for moral integrity. With the Hàn dynasty writing is definitively at the heart of government.

The different versions of the Cāng Jié legend up until the Hàn dynasty also suggest the richness of approaches and interpretations which prevailed before they became crystallised in the *Shuōwén*. They evoke, vaguely and from afar, the different versions of the transmitted texts that can be found, here and there, in the tombs before the Hàn. They give us a glimpse into how ideas circulated, developed, and varied depending on who was one's master and which texts one read, with a certain "freedom of expression" that contributed to their burgeoning, and, above all, avoided them becoming just carbon copies of each other.

In the end, we have been able to see how the narrative of Cāng Jié's legend was constructed and elaborated over time through the authors who quoted the legend, each of them developing the theme according to his own convictions, or attempting to make a particular point. Xǔ Shèn clearly sifted through these different versions and selected the elements which he intended to keep, performing a sort of rationalization. By re-organizing the legend of Cāng Jié to adapt it to the context of the other legends adopted by the Hàn (Fú Xī, Shén Nóng, Huángdì), but also to make it more coherent and plausible, Xǔ Shèn in a way played an equivalent role to that of Liú Xiàng 劉向 (79 B.C. - 8 B.C.) and Liú Xīn 劉歆 (46 B.C. - 23 A.D.) with respect to the ancient texts. In this way, he contributed to establishing and imposing the

---

<sup>62</sup> Subsequently, the discovery of texts in ancient characters would generate major questions on the history and evolution of writing, and lead to the theory of the *liùshū* 六書 taken up again by Xǔ Shèn in the *Shuōwén*.

<sup>63</sup> In fact, as Jean Levi shows marvelously from anecdotes taken from the *Hánfēizǐ* (such as that of the man who inadvertently records an order he gave to his servants in the letter he is writing to the court of Yān, or that of the man from Zhèng who returned home to look for the measure of his foot to buy shoes, etc.) (1995:45 *et seq.*), Hán Fēi falls in the same lineage as Lǎo Zǐ and "criticises the bookish practice and the absurdities to which it leads".

legend, once and for all.<sup>64</sup>

### Bibliography

- Acker, William R.B. (tr. and ann.) 1954: *Some T'ang and Pre-T'ang Texts on Chinese Painting*. Leiden, E.J. Brill.
- Boltz, William 1994: *The Origin and Early Development of the Chinese Writing System*. New Haven, American Oriental Society.
- Bottéro, Françoise 2002: "Revisiting the *wen* and the *zi*: The Great Chinese Characters Hoax." In: *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 74:14-33.
- Bottéro, Françoise 2003: Les manuels de caractères à l'époque des Han. In: *Éducation et instruction en Chine*. Vol. 1 (L'éducation élémentaire), ed. by Christine Nguyen Try and Catherine Despeux. Bibliothèque de l'INALCO no. 4, Paris – Louvain, éditions Peeters: 99-120.
- Chén Qíyóu 陳奇猷 1984: *Lǚshì chūnqiū jiàoshì* 呂氏春秋校釋 [Commentary on the *Lǚshì chūnqiū*]. 4 vols. Shànghǎi, Xuélín chūbǎnshè 學林出版社.
- Chén Qíyóu 陳奇猷 2000: *Hánfēizǐ xīn jiàozhù* 韓非子新校注 [New Commentary on the *Hánfēizǐ*]. 2 vols. Shànghǎi, Gǔjí chūbǎnshè 古籍出版社.
- Duàn Yùcái 段玉裁 1988: *Shuōwén jiězì zhù* 說文解字注 [Notes on the *Shuōwén jiězì*]. Shànghǎi, Gǔjí chūbǎnshè 古籍出版社.
- Fukuda Tetsuyuki 福田哲之 1989: "Sōketsu hen no naiyō to kōzō – Fuyō Kankan Sōketsu hen wo chūshin to shite 倉頡篇の内容と構造 - 阜陽漢簡倉頡篇を中心として" [The Content and the Structure of the *Cāng Jié piān* – Focussing on the *Cāng Jié piān* of Fùyáng]. In: *Nihon chūgokugaku kaihō* 日本中国学会報 41:223-239.
- Fukuda Tetsuyuki 福田哲之 1993: "Chūka jinmin kyōwakoku kenkoku go shinkaku Tonkō kankan ni midasareru shogakusho zankan 中華人民共和國建國後新獲敦煌漢簡に見出される小学書殘簡" [The Fragments of *ars minor* Texts among the Hàn Bamboo Slips Found in Dūnhuáng after the Foundation of the People's Republic of China]. In: *Shūkan Tōyōgaku* 集刊東洋学 69:1-17.
- Gernet, Jacques 1972: *Le monde chinois*. Paris, Armand Colin.
- Hànshū* 漢書, by Bān Gù 班固 (32-92 A.D.). 12 vols. Běijīng: Zhōnghuá shūjú 中華書局 1962.
- Hòu Hànshū* 後漢書, by Fàn Yè 范曄 (398- 445). 12 vols. Běijīng: Zhōnghuá shūjú 中華書局 1965.
- Hú Píngshēng 胡平生 and Hán Zìqiáng 韓自強 1983: "Fùyáng Hànjiǎn Cāng Jié piān 阜陽漢簡〈蒼頡篇〉" and "*Cāng Jié piān* de chūbù yánjiū 〈蒼頡篇〉的初步研究" [The *Cāng Jié piān*'s Bamboo Slips from Fùyáng and the First

<sup>64</sup> This legend was still alive in 1928, when Maspero (1971:169) wrote in "Mythologie de la Chine moderne": "Les conteurs publics ont pour patron Cāng Jié, l'inventeur légendaire de l'écriture".

- Studies on the *Cāng Jié piān*]. In: *Wénwù* 文物 2:24-34, 34-40.
- Hú Píngshēng 胡平生 1996: "*Cāng Jié piān xīn zīliào de yánjiū*" 蒼頡篇新資料的研究." [Studies on the New Material Concerning the *Cāng Jié piān*]. In: *Jiǎnbó yánjiū* 簡帛研究 2:332-349.
- Huáng Huī 黃暉 1990: *Lùnhéng jiàoshì* 論衡校釋 [Commentary on the *Lùnhéng*]. 4 vols. Běijīng, Zhōnghuá shūjú.
- Kaizuka Shigeki 貝塚茂樹 1981: *Nihongo no sekai* 日本語の世界 3 [The World of the Japanese Language]. Tokyō, Chuō kōronsha 中央公論社.
- Knoblock, John 1994: *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works*. Stanford (California), Stanford University Press.
- Knoblock, John and Riegel, Jeffrey 2000: *The Annals of Lü Buwei*. Stanford (California), Stanford University Press.
- Láo Gàn 勞幹 1960: *Jūyán Hànjǎn* 居延漢簡 [Documents of the Hàn Dynasty on Wooden Slips from Edsin gol]. Táiběi, Zhōngyāng yánjiūyuàn lìshǐ yǔyán yánjiū suǒ 中央研究院歷史語言研究所.
- Levi, Jean 1995: *La Chine Romanesque - Fictions d'Orient et d'Occident*. Paris, Seuil.
- Levi, Jean 1999: *Han-Fei-tse ou le Tao du prince*. Paris, Le Seuil.
- Maspero, Henri 1971: *Le taoïsme et les religions chinoises*. Paris, Gallimard.
- Qiú Xīguī 裘錫圭 1988: *Wénzìxué gāiyào* 文字學概要 [Chinese Writing]. Běijīng, Shāngwù chūbǎnshè 商務出版社.
- Seidel, Anna 1983: *Imperial Treasures and Taoist Sacraments: Taoist Roots in the Apocrypha*. In: *Tantric and Taoist Studies in Honour of R.A. Stein, II*, ed. by Michel Strickmann. *Mélanges chinois et bouddhiques* 21. Brussels, Institut Belge des Hautes Études Chinoises.
- [SSJZS =] *Shísānjīng zhùshū* 十三經注疏 [Commentaries on the Thirteen Classics]. Běijīng, Zhōnghuá shūjú 1980.
- [SWJZZ =] *Shuōwén jiězì zhù* 說文解字注 by Duàn Yùcái 段玉裁
- Shǐjì 史記, by Sīmǎ Qiān 司馬遷 (163- 85). 10 vols. Běijīng, Zhōnghuá shūjú 1982.
- Sūn Jūnxī 孫鈞錫 1991: *Zhōngguó hànzì xuéshǐ* 中國漢字學史 [The History of the Study of the Chinese Writing]. Shíjiāzhuāng 石家莊, Xuéyuàn chūbǎnshè 學院出版社.
- Tàipíng yùlǎn* 太平御覽. 4 vols. Běijīng, Zhōnghuá shūjú 1960.
- Takeda Masaya 武田雅哉 1994: *Sōketsu tachi no utage* 蒼頡たちの宴 [*Cāng Jié's Banquet*]. Tōkyō, Chikuma shobō 筑摩書房.
- Táng Lán 唐蘭 1979: *Zhōngguó wénzìxué* 中國文字學 [The Study of Chinese Writing]. Shànghǎi, Gǔjí chūbǎnshè.
- Wáng Xiānqiān 王先謙 1988: *Xúnzǐ jíjiě* 荀子集解 [Collected Commentaries on *Xúnzǐ*]. Běijīng, Zhōnghuá shūjú.
- Xiāo Tǒng 蕭統 1931: *Wénxuǎn* 文選 [Selections of Refined Literature]. 14 vols. Shànghǎi, Shāngwù yìnshūguǎn.
- Xú Kǎi 徐鍇 1987: *Shuōwén jiězì xìzhuàn* 說文解字繫傳. Běijīng, Zhōnghuá shūjú.
- Xú Xuàn 徐鉉 1988: *Shuōwén jiězì* 說文解字 [Explaining the Graphs and Interpreting the Characters]. Běijīng, Zhōnghuá shūjú.

- Yáo Xiàosù 姚孝遂 1995: *Zhōngguó wénzìxué shǐ* 中國文字學史 [The History of the Study of Chinese Writing]. Jílín, Jiàoyù chūbǎnshè 教育出版社.
- Zhāng Shuāngdì 張雙棣 1997: *Huáinánzǐ jiàoshì* 淮南子校釋 [Commentary on the *Huáinánzǐ*]. Běijīng, Běijīng dàxué chūbǎnshè 北京大學出版社.
- Zhāng Yùjīn 張玉金 and Xià Zhōnghuá 夏中華 2001: *Hànzìxué gàilùn* 漢字學概論 [Essentials of the Study of Chinese Writing]. Nánníng 南寧, Guǎngxī jiàoyù chūbǎnshè 廣西教育出版社.