

THE MYTH OF THE QIN UNIFICATION OF WRITING IN HAN SOURCES

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This study explores the unification of the script that allegedly happened in 221 BC when the Qin ruler united China and assumed the title of the First Emperor. By re-examining the earliest sources where the unification is described (i.e. the *Shiji*, the *Hanshu*, and the *Shuowen jiezi*). This paper argues that there was a political and ideological agenda behind ascribing the process to a single person, namely, the victorious Qin ruler. In reality, however, the archaeological material from the periods before and after the reign of the First Emperor does not reflect this vision of a sudden and comprehensive shift in writing. Even edict plates issued by the Qin government and attached to the new standardised weights as a verification of them being standardised did not reveal a presence of a uniform script. Moreover, the weights themselves showed a certain degree of deviation from their face value, revealing that the idea of a “standard”, even if it existed, was much looser than today. Epigraphic material shows that the script changed gradually, over decades, even hundreds, of years and not as a one-time effort of a single person. My contention is that this idea of unification was a Han creation that developed mainly during the 1st century AD.

Key words: unification of writing, *Shuowen jiezi*, Han standardisation, First Emperor of Qin, Li Si.

The archaeological discoveries of the last few decades have provided an unprecedented amount of Warring States 戰國 (453–221 BC) texts in the form of manuscripts and inscriptions on various objects. The new material, as I argue in this study, refutes the traditional understanding of the role of the Qin in the history of the Chinese script, according to which the reforms of the First Emperor 秦始皇 (r. 246–210 BC) eliminated the various regional scripts and created an orthographically uniform script. The traditional view is that these reforms, as all other Qin measures, had been carried out with strict military and bureaucratic rigour, ensuring a complete success.

The earliest extant historical record of the reform occurs in the *Shiji* 史記. Only a hundred years after the reforms, Sima Qian 司馬遷 (145–86 BC) documented that, beside standardising the legal code, axle widths, and weight and length meas-

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ures, the First Emperor also unified the writing system.¹ In view of the overall significance of the event, it is surprising to see that this was the only mention of it in the *Shiji*, which was verbose with respect to other events. Sima Qian referred, for example, to the infamous burning of books on numerous occasions.²

The study of the Qin reform is important because if we knew how it affected writing, we could retrace the changes made to the script and partially reconstruct the original state of Warring States writing. However, most of our knowledge of the Qin reforms derives from two sources. These two sources are the description after the *Xiaoxue* 小學 section of the *Hanshu* “Yiwenzhi” 漢書《藝文志》 (hereafter: *Hanshu*) and the *Shuowen jiezi* “Postface” 說文解字《敘》 (hereafter: *Shuowen*). These two accounts resemble each other so closely that there is no doubt that they are two versions of the same account. In later times, traditional scholarship uniformly relied on these two sources to interpret the Qin unification and this has led to misconceptions. One of these misconceptions was viewing the characters in Warring States writing as having structural constancy.

I believe that there have been two main reasons why both traditional and modern scholars failed to see the true nature of pre-Qin writing. The first reason was that Han scholars, as part of the current trend to map the universe onto a systematic grid of correlations, depicted contemporary writing as a more consistent system than it really was. The Han was a period of standardisation of knowledge. However, it is worth remembering that contemporary people saw this standardisation not as the creation of a regulated system but as the depiction of the true nature of things. The ultimate task of an individual was to be in accord with this true nature of things. The *Huangdi Sijing* 黃帝四經 manuscript excavated at Mawangdui says: “Accord means life ... disaccord means death” 順則生... 逆則死.³ Thus the Han image of the universe was, like any comprehensive ideological system, a prescriptive view that claimed to be descriptive. The second reason was that scholars in later times, who saw character constancy as part of their writing system, believed that it was an *a priori* characteristic of the script. Consequently, they approached early Chinese writing with this presumption.

In this paper, I will try to look at the Han accounts with a fresh eye, without the biases of later scholars. I will also employ epigraphic evidence to compare the actual state of writing during the Warring States and Qin–Han periods with its Han descriptions. This will allow me to demonstrate that rather than describing the actual Qin reform of the script, Han scholars created an idealised image of the events. The same holds true for their description of the state of writing in the Han.

¹ *Shiji* 6.

² E.g. *Shiji* 6, 28, 32, 121, 130.

³ Chen Guying (1995). The *Huangdi sijing* manuscript discusses in detail the concepts of accord and disaccord as a general principle of arranging one’s conduct in harmony with the forces of the universe. The concept of “accord means life, disaccord means death” is also reflected in Han medical literature, especially in the *Huangdi neijing* 黃帝內經.

Karlgren's account of the relationship between the Qin standardisation of the script and the *Shuowen* account represents, and is itself an example of, the traditional views. It is precisely this kind of views that I take issue with in this paper.

“The epoch-making work of Xu Shen is so much the more valuable as it was published only three centuries after Li Si and as therefore an unbroken tradition must have continued to the time of Xu about the interpretation of most of the characters.” (Karlgren 1974, p. 3, n. 1)

1. The *Hanshu* and the *Shuowen*

The “Postface” of the *Shuowen* is perhaps the most commonly cited descriptions of the Qin reform of writing. But a very similar description also appears in Ban Gu's 班固 (32–92 AD) narrative after the *Xiaoxue*, i.e. philological, section of the “Yiwenzhi” chapter of the *Hanshu*. The two accounts, as I have indicated, are so close to each other that one has to consider them two versions of the same text.

Ban Gu based the “Yiwenzhi” on Liu Xin's 劉歆 (ca. 46 BC–AD 23) *Qilue* 七略 which, in turn, followed Liu Xiang's 劉向 (79–8 BC) *Bielu* 別錄. This information is known from Ban Gu's introduction to the “Yiwenzhi”, where he wrote that the chapter recorded the essence (其要) of the *Qilue*.⁴ This does not tell whether the account dealing with the history of writing came from the *Qilue* or the *Bielu*, and we can only treat the “Yiwenzhi” as a text that dates to the second half of the first century AD. If this is true, then Ban Gu's account predated the parallel passages in the “Postface” to the *Shuowen*, which was written around AD 100.

The *Shuowen* account was longer and more detailed, it contained almost the complete text of the *Hanshu* account. The only additional information in the *Hanshu* version was a few bibliographical sentences and these were not related to the history of writing. Although the two accounts were closely related, there were some discrepancies too. For example, only Xu Shen mentioned the often-cited description of Li Si discarding the scripts which were not in accordance with the Qin writing. The same is true for the discontinuation of the *guwen* 古文 script. As a general rule, the *Shuowen* appears to be more subjective with respect to the role of the Qin than the *Hanshu*, which mentioned neither the termination of the scripts of the six states and the discontinuation of the *guwen* script, nor the burning of books.

A detailed study of the relationship between these two accounts would go beyond the scope of this study. For my purposes, it is sufficient to establish that these two descriptions not only retold the same story but were actually variants of the same text. Regardless whether one of them was borrowing from the other or both of them were based on a third source, we can ascertain that the accounts reflected a first century AD view. Because the *Shuowen* account included most of the *Hanshu* account, I use the former to discuss the Han views of the Qin reforms. I only cite the

⁴ Ban Gu describes the genealogy of the “Yiwenzhi” at the beginning of the chapter.

Hanshu when it differs from the *Shuowen*, and when that difference is relevant to the point I am illustrating.

2. The *Shuowen* small seal script

Each character in the extant versions of the *Shuowen* is headed by its seal script form, followed by a gloss and explanation in modern script. Xu Shen wrote in the “Postface” that he used the seal script for the head entries in the dictionary:

今敘篆文，合以古籀。

I arranged the [dictionary] based on the seal forms, and supplemented them with *guwen* and *zhouwen* forms.

Although Xu did not state clearly whether “seal forms” referred to the small seal (*xiaozhuan* 小篆) or the great seal (*dazhuan* 大篆) forms, there are two major reasons to assume that he meant the small seal forms. The first reason is that out of the three instances when he used the word *dazhuan*, twice he used it as the title of a book composed by the Grand Historian Zhou 籀.

及宣王太史籀，著《大篆》十五篇，與古文或異。

In the time of King Xuan, Zhou, the Grand Historian composed the *Dazhuan* in fifteen chapters, [the character forms of which] were somewhat different from the *guwen* script.

秦始皇帝初兼天下，丞相李斯乃奏同之，罷其不與秦文合者。斯作《倉頡篇》。中車府令趙高作《爰歷篇》。大史令胡毋敬作《博學篇》。皆取史籀《大篆》，或頗省改，所謂小篆也。

When for the first time [in history] the First Emperor of Qin united the subcelestial world, Li Si, his Grand Councillor presented a proposal to unify them (i.e. the scripts or character forms) and discard what was not in accord with the Qin script. Li Si wrote the *Cangjie pian*, Zhao Gao, the Keeper of Carriages, wrote the *Yuanli pian*, and Humu Jing, the Grand Historian wrote the *Boxue pian*. All of them borrowed [characters] from Historian Zhou’s *Dazhuan*, although they sometimes altered and abbreviated those.

In the body of the dictionary, when he listed examples of ancient character forms that were different from the head entries, Xu Shen only used the term *zhouwen* 籀文, never *dazhuan*, to refer to the forms of the script of Historian Zhou. Thus in Xu Shen’s view, the term *zhouwen* is the same as the great seal script. The physical appearance of the *zhouwen* forms led some scholars (e.g. Wang Guowei 王國爲) to the conviction that the *zhouwen* were in fact Zhou bronze inscription forms.

The third time Xu mentioned the *dazhuan* script, he used the term to specify one of the eight calligraphic styles in use after the Qin.

自爾秦書有八體：一曰大篆，二曰小篆，三曰刻符，四曰蟲書，五曰摹印，六曰署書，七曰殳書，八曰隸書。漢興有草書。

Starting from the Qin, there were eight styles of script: the first one was the great seal script; the second the small seal script; the third the tally carving script; the fourth the insect script; the fifth the seal stamping script; the sixth the title script; the seventh the spear inscription script; the eighth the clerical script. From the rise of the Han there was the draft script.

Although there is no indication to what the great seal script was, a few lines later Xu Shen explained the small seal script:

時有六書：一曰古文，孔子壁中書也。二曰奇字，即古文而異也。三曰篆書，即小篆。四曰左書，即秦隸書。秦始皇帝使下杜人程邈所作也。五曰繆篆，所以摹印也。六曰鳥蟲書，所以書幡信也。

At this time, there were six scripts. The first one was the *guwen* script, which was the script on the documents found in the wall of the house of Confucius; the second the odd characters, i.e. the unusual *guwen* forms; the third the seal script, i.e. the small seal script; the fourth the attendant script, i.e. the Qin clerical script created by Cheng Mao from Xiadu under the commission of the First Emperor of Qin; the fifth the pseudo-seal script used for seal carving; the sixth the bird and insect script used to write on banners.

The above passage confirms that when Xu used the term “seal script” without a modifier, he was referring to the small seal script. Since in the above passage “seal script” is used as a technical term, we can exclude the possibility that Xu Shen might have used it with reference to the great seal script.

In view of the above, we can ascertain that Xu Shen was using the small seal script as the head entries in his dictionary. As we have already seen, he also stated that the small seal script was created by Li Si as the result of the reform of writing. This might lead us to assume that the *Shuowen* recorded the character forms created by Li Si. However, although this has been a common assumption on the part of traditional scholarship, Xu Shen never stated explicitly that the small seal characters heading the *Shuowen* entries were the characters created by Li Si. During the approximately three hundred years that separated Xu Shen from Li Si's reforms, it would not be surprising if the small seal script had evolved further and undergone some changes.

The Qin small seal script can be seen on the numerous bronze inscriptions of the First Emperor's edict on the standardisation of the measures of capacity, weight, and length. The Qin administration had the edict inscribed on scales and weights, as

well as separate bronze edict plates (*zhaoban* 詔版) which were attached onto those scales and weights that have passed the official inspection. Below is a typical example of an inscription with the First Emperor's edict (Wang Hui 1990, Part II., p. 102):



廿六年，皇帝盡併兼天下諸侯，黔首大安，立號爲皇帝。乃詔丞相狀、縮：法度量則，不壹歟疑者，皆明壹之。

In the twenty sixth year [of his reign] (= 221 BC), the Emperor entirely unified the feudal lords of the empire,⁵ brought great peace to the people, and assumed the title of the emperor. Therefore, he ordered his Grand Councillors Zhuang and Wan to standardise the measures and normalise those which were suspect to being irregular.⁶

There have been many such inscriptions found on measure tools. The inscription is always the same in each case, regardless of the object on which it had been inscribed. Often the Second Emperor of Qin 二世 had his own edict inscribed after the

⁵ There has been some debate whether the sentence breaks before or after 諸侯. The two possibilities are:

併兼天下諸侯，黔首大安 – unified the feudal lords of the empire, brought great peace to the people.

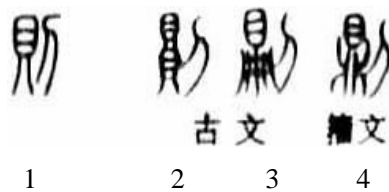
併兼天下，諸侯黔首大安 – unified the empire, brought great peace to the feudal lords and the people.

I adopted the first punctuation in my translation, following Wang Hui's (1990, p. 109) argument.

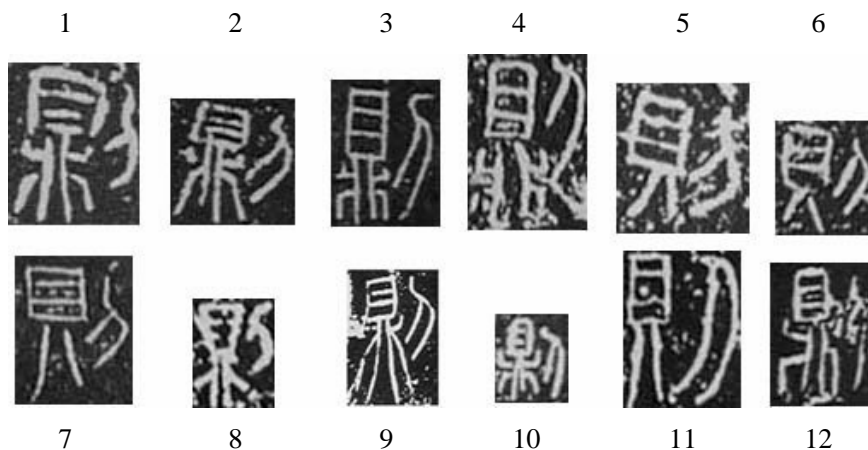
⁶ The meaning of the character 則 in 法度量則 is also debated. The two main opinions are whether it is a noun or adverb in this context. Wang Hui (1990, p. 109) argues, based on the gloss of 則 in the *Shuowen*, according to which the meaning of the character is to draw an object after a model, that 則 is a touchstone used to test weights and scales.

edict of the First Emperor. Accordingly, some of these measure tools have been used consecutively during the reign of both emperors.⁷

If we compare the *Shuowen* small seal script with the small seal forms on the above Qin inscriptions, we can see that in many cases there were differences between the *Shuowen* and actual Qin small seal forms. For example, the *Shuowen* listed the following forms for the character 則:



Form #1 is the small seal form heading the entry for the character in the dictionary. Forms #2 and #3 are the *guwen* forms and form #4 is the *zhouwen* form. The *Shuowen* small seal form (#1) consisted of the components 貝 and 刀, just like the modern form. In contrast with this, the edict plate forms were written in different ways (Wang Hui 1990, Part II, pp. 98, 102, 108, 111, 131–133, 145, 147, 148, 156):



Out of the twelve forms above, only four are structurally identical to the *Shuowen* small seal form: #5, #6, #7, and #11. The majority of the Qin character forms consist of not 貝 and 刀 but 鼎 and 刀. Xu Shen presented this structure as the *zhouwen* 籀文 form in the *Shuowen*, indicating that, at least in his opinion, this form had been changed by Li Si during the reform of the script.

⁷ The Second Emperor did not invent the custom of carving additional edicts onto existing ones. There is at least one extant example when the First Emperor appended his edict onto a Warring States weight. See Wu Hung (1979, p. 36).

The observation that character forms on the Qin bronze inscriptions were not identical to the small seal script of the *Shuowen* is not new. Wu Hung 巫鴻 has performed an analysis of the Qin weights and in the course of his study, he touched upon the discrepancies of character forms (Wu Hung 1979). Below are a few examples from a large table that compared the Qin bronze inscription forms with the *Shuowen* small seal forms (Wu Hung 1979, pp. 36–37).



Wu Hung called the character forms on the left side, which he had most likely taken from the *Shuowen*, “Qin standard small seal script” 秦代標準小篆.⁸

For Wu Hung, the above evidence demonstrated that the inscriptions were written in a less formal script and not the standard Qin small seal script. He thus felt justified to rectify former views on the nature of the script in which the Qin edicts were written. One such view was Qiu Xigui’s former opinion that the Qin officials had to write the official decrees and laws with small seal script, never with the clerical script used for penal administration (Qiu Xigui 1974, 1). However, Wu regarded the *Shuowen* forms as the true image of the Qin small seal script and viewed the archaeological material in the light of this assumption.

Contrary to Wu’s conclusion, I believe the above evidence demonstrates that the small seal script displayed in the *Shuowen* was not identical to the Qin small seal script. Even within the short text of the First Emperor’s edict there were cases of dissimilarity with the *Shuowen* small seal forms. This tells us that the small seal script that Xu Shen displayed in the *Shuowen* was not the original Qin seal script. Consequently, we have to distinguish between the Qin small script used at the end of the second century BC and a Han small seal script used around AD 100.

⁸ The numbers under the character forms indicate the object number in Wu Hung’s catalogue. The asterisk sign (*) under some of the forms indicates that the form occurred on more than five different inscriptions.

3. Character variability within the Qin small seal script

Xu Shen organised the characters in the *Shuowen* under 9,353 single head entries. Because of this, subsequent scholarship assumed that the small seal script used for his entries was orthographically uniform. Although the *Shuowen* also listed 1,163 variant forms, these appeared under, and could only be accessed through, the main entries. The same is true for the few cases of alternate forms 或體. Thus the organisation of the *Shuowen* implied that the character forms of the small seal script were more or less standardised.

However, we have already seen that sometimes the character forms on Qin bronze inscriptions were different not only from the *Shuowen* forms but also from each other. In the case of the character 貝, there were at least two major forms, both of which were commonly used. One of the twelve examples above (貝) can be understood as a transitional form between the two dominant forms.⁹ In this transitional form, the left side of the character, written as 貝 in one form and 鼎 in the other, was a simplified version of 鼎 which differed from 貝 only in the two extra strokes at each side of the bottom part of the character.

The examples in Wu Hung's table also testify to the lack of uniformity in Qin writing. Wang Hui also cited several cases of inconstant character forms on Qin measures (Wang Hui 1990, p. 108). One such case was the character 兼 being written with different radicals on different inscriptions. Based on the large number of discrepancies in attested bronze inscriptions, Wang came to the conclusion that "the Qin policy on the standardisation of the script had not been put into practice rigorously" (Wang Hui 1990, p. 108).

I have to agree with Wang Hui's conclusion. The differences between the character forms on the edict plates prove that the seal script in common use during Li Si's time was not thoroughly consistent. Despite the reforms, most of the population still wrote characters with variable structure. It is also possible that the Qin had a higher degree of tolerance towards variation and the forms on the edict plates still fell within the accepted scope of variation. Xu Shen, and his later interpreters, seriously overstated the effect of the reform of writing. The inscriptions with the edict of the First Emperor testify that the reforms did not create a uniform script.

4. Character variability within the Han small seal script

Above I have shown that the Qin small seal script of the First Emperor was not identical to the small seal script used by Xu Shen in his dictionary. Beside the transmitted text of the *Shuowen*, the state of the Han small seal script is seen on the Yuanan stele 袁安碑 now held in the Henan Provincial museum. The stele dates to AD 117, thus it

⁹ The word transitional here, as well as later in my discussion, does not imply a linear move between two final points. I only use the term as a temporary definition for specifying the location of a hitherto unknown script between two already known forms. Depending on the point of view, any script can be thought of as transitional.

is contemporary with the *Shuowen*. The 139 small seal characters of the inscription were executed with care and precision, closely resembling the forms found in the *Shuowen*. Below is a sample from the inscription, demonstrating its uniform calligraphy.



Even within the short text of the inscriptions, there are 25 characters that occur at least twice, some as many as 9 or 10 times, making the inscription an ideal resource for examining the variations in character structure. When we compare the characters with each other, we can see that almost all characters share a uniform structure. The only exception is the character 四, written in two different ways.



1

2

3



4

Character form #2 resembles the character 匹 rather than 四. The context, however, makes it clear that this form stood for the word “four”: “fourth month of the fifth year” 五年四月.¹⁰ The archaic pronunciations of 匹 and 四 were distant enough from each other to exclude the possibility of phonetic borrowing. Since the *Shuowen*

¹⁰ The context of this character form can be seen visually on the sample of the inscription above. The character form in question is the third one in the middle row.

glossed 匹 as a length measure equivalent to four *zhang* 丈, there is a loose semantic connection between the two characters. But the most obvious link between the two forms is graphical.

Despite this single graphic variation we can say that the rest of the repeated characters on the Yuanan stele show a high degree of consistency. The style of the characters is close to the small seal form of the *Shuowen*, but there are still some differences in the structure of characters.

	Yuananbei		<i>Shuowen</i>
1	徒		𡗗
2	樸		𡗗
3	謁		謁
4	賓		賓

The Yuananbei and *Shuowen* forms of character #1 (徒) differ greatly in overall balance and arrangement, even though the basic components (彳, 止, and 土) are the same in both forms. The Yuanan form of character #2 (樸) was written without the central vertical stroke in it.¹¹ The difference between the two forms of character #3 (謁) lies in the right bottom part where, in the *Shuowen* form, one element encircles the other. The middle part of the Yuanan form of character #4 (賓) resembles 夕 (as in 多 or 名), whereas the *Shuowen* form has 正 at the corresponding place.

Despite these differences, both the *Shuowen* and the Yuanan stele, taken by themselves, present a uniform image of the small seal script. Only when they are compared with each other do we realise that this uniformity was local. The conclusions are twofold. First, the differences between the Yuanan and *Shuowen* forms show that even in AD 100 the Han small seal script was not uniform. Second, both the Yuanan stele and the *Shuowen* recorded a uniquely idealised version of the small seal script.

¹¹ The *Ganlu zishu* recorded the same two forms of 樸 existing during the Tang, and explains that the one with the extended vertical stroke (*Shuowen* form) was the popular form, whereas the one without the stroke (Yuananbei) was the formal form. See Yan Yuansun (1873).

5. The reality of the Qin reform of writing

Xu Shen described the birth of the small seal script as an effort to create a national standard. He ascribed this task to three people:

Li Si wrote the *Cangjie pian*, Zhao Gao, the Keeper of Carriages, wrote the *Yuanli pian*, and Humu Jing, the Grand Historian wrote the *Boxue pian*. All of them borrowed [characters] from Historian Zhou's *Da-zhuan*, although they sometimes altered and abbreviated those. This was what they call the small seal script.¹²

However, the Qin inscriptions of the First Emperor's edict demonstrate that the Qin small seal script at the time of the reforms was still characterised by a large degree of inconstancy. These official documents recorded the words of the emperor and were written in the official script of the state, the Qin small seal script. This implies that, contrary to Xu's claim, the script did not change overnight as the result of three people's work.

In fact, epigraphic evidence shows that the changes were the result of a gradual historical process that began before the establishment of the Qin dynasty and lasted far into the Han, possibly even longer. Inscriptions made prior to the Qin unification testify that the small seal script was already in general use before the reforms. Zhu Dexi 朱德熙 noted that the inscription on the Xinqi hufu 新郢虎符 from 16 years prior to Li Si's reform was already written in a script that had no noticeable difference with the small seal script (Zhu Dexi 1995, p. 78). Therefore, as far as the creation and the origin of the small seal script goes, Xu Shen's account was not correct.

The Mawangdui silk manuscripts provide an even more convincing example of the gradual changes that had been occurring in the evolution of the script. Although the tomb dated to 168 BC, the documents found inside were written in different times. The editors of the *Mawangdui boshu yishu* 馬王堆帛書藝術 volume divided the documents of the silk manuscripts based on their calligraphy into three groups, which also represented temporal differences.¹³ They categorised the first group as *zhuanli* 篆隸 (seal/clerical) manuscripts, referring to documents written in a script where the characteristics of the small seal script were stronger than those of the clerical script. The writing style of the documents written in the *zhuanli* script resembled the calligraphy of the Chu manuscripts found in Warring States tombs, whereas the structure of characters generally followed the Qin small seal script. The visual similarity with the Chu script is understandable because the manuscripts came from a tomb on the territory of the ancient state of Chu.¹⁴ The editors categorised the second group of

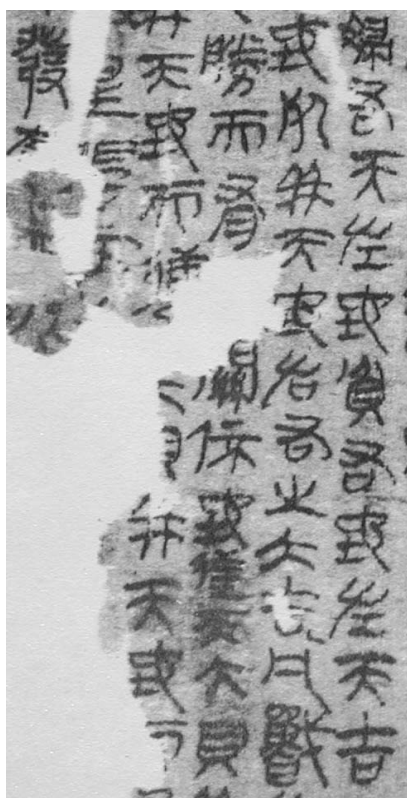
¹² See Section 2 above.

¹³ Demonstrating the transitional nature of these scripts, scholars have been using different terms to describe the scripts of the Mawangdui manuscripts. Some have distinguished, for example, a purely seal script from a purely clerical script version of the *Yinyang wuxing* 陰陽五行 manuscripts. See Chen Songchang (1996).

¹⁴ Boltz observed that the Mawangdui manuscripts, which were "fairly representative of the script that was in conventional use within a decade or two of the Qin reforms", were untouched by the reforms, but he attributed this to the fact that Chu was in the south. See Boltz (1994).

manuscripts as *guli* 古隸 (ancient clerical) manuscripts, referring to documents written in a type of clerical script that still retained elements of the seal script. The third group was categorised as *Hanli* 漢隸 (Han clerical) manuscripts, indicating documents written in the clerical script of the Han which had already lost any similarity with the seal script (Chen Songchang 1996, pp. 2–3).

Beside demonstrating the lack of a clear-cut borderline between seal and clerical scripts, the Mawangdui manuscripts also reveal that character structure was not standardised during the Western Han. Below is a section from the *Yinyang wuxing jiapian* 陰陽五行甲篇 manuscript with a transcription of its larger context.¹⁵



凡道
 婦右天左地
 貧右地左天
 吉休地逆天
 娠
 天逆天死并天地左右之大吉
 凡戰左天右地勝
 休
 天逆地勝而有闕
 休地逆天大貝并天地而左右
 之一數十并天地而逆
 大貝并天地而右之王戰

The organisers of the Mawangdui corpus classified this manuscript as a *zhuanli* document, representing the oldest cluster of writings. What interests me here is the two distinct forms of the character 左. In the above section, the character occurs three times. Twice in the first line, in the phrases 右天左地 (protect Heaven and assist the Earth) and 右地左天 (protect the Earth and assist Heaven), once in the second line,

¹⁵ See Boltz (1994, p. 24). The first vertical line of the manuscript portion shown here starts with the character 婦 and ends with the character 吉, which are characters #3 and #13 in the transcription.

in the phrase 並天地左右之大 (combine the greatness of the protection and assistance of Heaven and Earth).¹⁶ In the first two instances, the character is written with the 工 component, in the third with the 口 component.



Both of these forms are well-attested ways of writing the character 左. The difference between them is that the first one is the clerical form, the second is the small seal form. Since the identical context reveals that there is no difference in the usage of the word, we have to conclude that these two forms were in concurrent use, which speaks against a strict orthographic standard at the time. It also shows that the transition between small seal script and clerical script was gradual.

The orthographic inconsistencies in the above documents indicate that Li Si's reform of writing was not universally adopted. This is also confirmed by the fact that the Second Emperor of Qin had to reissue edicts regarding the standardisation of weight measures. Apparently, the original edict of his father had not fully achieved its purpose. Indeed, analysing the physical weight of the Qin weights, Wu Hung observed that on the very objects that carried the edict on standardisation there still were discrepancies (Wu Hung 1979, pp. 38–40). These discrepancies could be observed even on attested, well-preserved weights that had specific weight values inscribed on them.

In light of the above examples, we can say that Li Si did not fully transform the nature of writing in China through his reforms. The main role of his reform on the grand scale of the evolution of writing lay in establishing the Qin small seal script as the official script in the country. However, the changes leading to the regularisation of the Qin small seal and the clerical scripts happened over the course of several centuries, as a result of a gradual historical process. Evidence shows that the Qin attempts at standardisation were not always as immediately successful as it had been depicted in traditional sources.

6. Inconstancy as a moral issue in the Han

The Qin bronze inscriptions reveal the lack of a uniform standard in Qin times. The Mawangdui manuscripts from the Han show an even greater degree of character variability. This variability manifested itself in both the structure of individual characters and the use of phonetic loan character. Such freedom testifies to the flexibility on the part of the writer, as well as to the tolerance on the part of the reader.

The *Shuowen* and the *Hanshu* argue for a once-existed golden age of writing in which the script was uniform. When the world went into decline, this uniformity disappeared too.

¹⁶ On the manuscript section above, 左 is characters #4 and #9 in the first line, and #6 in the second.

Shuowen:

書曰：「予欲觀古人之象。」言必遵修舊文而不穿鑿。孔子曰：「吾猶及史之闕文，今亡矣夫。」蓋非其不知而不問。人用己私，是非無正，巧說邪辭，使天下學者疑。

The *Shangshu* says, "I wish to observe the images of the ancients". This means that one must revere the old text and not go into strained explanations". Confucius said, "I still seem to remember the times when the historian left empty spaces in the text. Today there is no such thing anymore!" This is a condemnation of not asking when one does not know. When people write according to their own fancy, right and wrong have no constancy, clever teachings and wicked words create doubts among the scholars of the world.

Hanshu:

古制，書必同文，不知則闕，問諸故老，至於衰世，是非無正，人用其私。故孔子曰：「吾猶及史之闕文也，今亡矣夫！」蓋傷其澹不正。

In the old system, documents had to be written with identical characters. If you did not know something, then you left an empty space and asked the elders. Once the world went into decline, right and wrong had no constancy, and people wrote according to their fancy. This is why Confucius said, "I still seem to remember the times when the historian left empty spaces in the text. Today there is no such thing anymore!" He was hurt by the saturation [of writing] with irregularities.

Both of these sources quoted *Lunyu* 15:26 where Confucius supposedly condemned the practice of his time to write without regard to the integrity of the text.

子曰：「吾猶及史之闕文；有馬者，借人乘之；今亡矣夫！」

The Master said: "I still seem to remember the times when the historian left empty spaces in the text. Those who had a horse, would lend it to someone else to ride. Today there are no such things anymore!"

The translation that I have given here is based on the Han interpretation of the passage as seen in the *Shuowen* and the *Hanshu*. In reality, however, the meaning of this passage is problematic. Numerous commentators and translators have offered different interpretations.¹⁷ Most of them followed Xu Shen's and Ban Gu's interpre-

¹⁷ To illustrate the difficulties translators have encountered trying to interpret the passage, below I cite a few translators, whose translations are based on Chinese scholarship.

"I have come across doubtful places in historical chronicles. The owner of a horse would lend it to another to ride. There is no such thing today!" Perelomov (1993, p. 416). A footnote comments, "Commentators unanimously point out that there is an omission in the text, since there is no logical connection between the two phrases".

tation and differed only in minor points. Still, I believe that the truth lies elsewhere. First, the character 交 rarely, if ever, indicated a written character in pre-Qin times. This is also true for the *Lunyu*, where the predominant meaning of the word is “culture”, “education”, “ethiquette”.¹⁸ Second, the traditional interpretation cannot convincingly link the phrase about lending a horse to the rest of the passage. As a means of solving both of these problems, I propose the following interpretation for this passage:

I seem to have reached a point when officials have no manners anymore. To have someone who owns a horse lending it to others to ride, alas, there is no such thing anymore!

From the point of view of grammar, this interpretation is grammatically equally sound, perhaps even superior to the awkward former reading.¹⁹ Moreover, what is just as important, this interpretation finally unites the disconnected sentence fragments into a coherent narrative that fits well our understanding of the philosophy and life of Confucius.

I am of the opinion that the *Shuowen* and the *Hanshu* did not use the *Lunyu* quote in its original sense. Still, I believe that this “interpretation” was not a misunderstanding but a conscious use of the text of the classics to demonstrate a point, even if the original meaning of the text was different. The connection, in Xu Shen’s and Ban Gu’s accounts, of the principle of *liushu* 六書 with the text of the *Zhouli* 周禮, which I will discuss later in this paper, reflects the same attitude. Therefore, one cannot really talk about the interpretation of the classics, since the classics were only cited to provide an authoritative opinion in favour of an otherwise not related argument.²⁰

The notion of the truthful scribe reflected a Han view of character inconstancy, according to which correct and consistent (*zheng* 正) writing was a moral issue. The

“I have arrived as it were at the annalist’s blank page. – Once he who had a horse would lend it to another to mount; anow, alas! It is not so.” Jennings (1985, p. 176). Footnote: “When the annalist was disgusted with current events, or in uncertainty about them, he would leave a blank to be filled up afterwards. So Confucius lamented the degeneracy of his times. The latter sentence in this paragraph is not quite clear.”

“I am old enough to have seen scribes who lacked refinement. Those who had horses would permit others to drive them. Nowadays, there are, I suppose, no longer such cases.” Lau (1979, p. 155). Footnote: “One’s carriages and horses are not things one should lightly permit others to use. To do so shows, therefore a lack of refinement.”

¹⁸ For the discussion of the meaning of 交 in early texts, see Zhou Cezong (1968, pp. 106–107).

¹⁹ The limits of this paper does not permit a full philological analysis of the passage. I demonstrated this in a separate, forthcoming article.

²⁰ The “recycling” of the text of the classics to promote one’s own agenda was probably an accepted methodology in the Han. My impression is that such reverse interpretations, when the text of the classics served to explain someone’s argument, instead of the other way around, originally did not occur as commentaries to the classics. However, commentators in later times did draw upon these sources and, when faced with difficult passages, cited them. This is how the concept of the “historian’s empty space” could have found its way into the *Lunyu* commentaries.

historian leaving an empty space demonstrated a moral superiority over those who in later times simply substituted unknown characters with others “according to their own fancy”. Irregular (*buzheng* 不正) writing came into existence with the world going into decline, a phenomenon that Han scholars invariably associated with “moral degeneration”. Both sources attributed the use of variant characters to the lack of constancy between right and wrong (*shifei wuzheng* 是非無正), i.e. moral standards.²¹

In a usual Han fashion, Xu Shen and Ban Gu projected the correct way of writing back to the times of antiquity. They implied that the existence of a standard (*zheng*) was the original and right (*shi* 是) way of writing, whereas the lack of it was caused by the decline of moral standards in the world. The task of the literary elite was to re-establish these standards, an act which at least partially symbolised the restoration of the original moral order in the world.

Since the ability, or choice, to write correctly was a measure of the scribe’s moral integrity, the standard way of writing had to be enforced in government service. Both the *Shuowen* and the *Hanshu* recorded the rule that if an official’s characters were not correct, he was to be punished immediately.

Shuowen:

尉律：學僮十七以上始試。諷籀書九千字，乃得爲史。又以八體試之。郡移太史並課。最者，以爲尙書史。書或不正，輒舉劾之。今雖有尉律，不課，小學不修，莫達其說久矣。

According to the regulations of official, students start their examinations at the age of 17. Once they memorise the 9,000 characters of the [Historian] Zhou’s script, they can become historians. Their test also includes the eight [calligraphic] styles. The prefects send [the students] to the Grand Historian who tests all of them together. The best of them will become Clerks of the Imperial Secretariat. If anyone writes irregularly, he is to be punished immediately.

Today, although we have the regulations of the officials, they are not enforced; students do not exercise themselves in the art of grammar; there has not been anyone who understood its teachings for a long time.

Hanshu:

漢興，蕭何草律，亦著其法，曰：「太史試學童，能諷書九千字以上，乃得爲史。又以六體試之，課最者以爲尙書御史史令史。吏民上書，字或不正，輒舉劾。」

²¹ The word *zheng* 正, which usually means “correct” could also be interpreted with reference to characters as “standard”. This usage is documented in the compound word *zhengzi* 正字 or *zhengti* 正體 which not only refer to the correct way of writing a character, but also to a constant way of writing it, implying an existence of a *standard*. In the phrase *shifei wuzheng* 是非無正, the word *zheng* 正 is once again used in the sense of constancy, standard.

At the rise of the Han, Xiao He (d.193 BC)²² drafted some regulations. He also composed their methods [of applications]: “The Grand Historian tests the students. Those who can memorise over 9,000 characters can become historians. Their text also includes the six [calligraphic] styles. The best of them will become Censors of the Imperial Secretariat and Calligraphy Clerks. If an official submits a document with irregular characters, he is to be immediately punished.”²³

These descriptions imply that irregularity in writing was not tolerated in government service during the Han. Naturally, regular or standard (*zheng*) writing in a centralised bureaucracy meant not only that a person always had to write the same character the same way, but that he also had to write that character the standard way and that all government employed people had to write it the same way.

The other thing we can infer is that, in reality, irregular writing was an existing phenomenon even among officials. Were all officials writing standard characters, surely there would not have been a rule against those who wrote irregular (*buzheng*) characters. Epigraphic evidence from contemporary stone inscriptions confirms that there was significant variation between character forms commonly used by the Han literati. The following character forms, for example, illustrate the inconstancies seen on stone inscriptions from the Han and the Period of Three Kingdoms.²⁴



The structure of the above character forms varies considerably, even though they are from the time period when the standard form was already imposed. The examples confirm Xu Shen's and Ban Gu's complaint about the lack of standard and

²² Xiao He is mentioned several times in the *Hanshu* as someone who had helped the Liu Bang 劉邦 (247–195 BC) to establish the empire by writing many of the Han laws and regulations.

²³ The recently published bamboo slips from Tomb #247 at Zhangjiashan 張家山 confirm that such regulations existed as early as 186 BC. The excavated slips to a large degree match the *Hanshu* and the *Shuowen*. See Li Xueqin (2002, 4, pp. 69–72).

²⁴ The examples are from Qin Gong (1995, pp. 286, 602, 773). The first character in each row is the modern dictionary form of the character, the rest are transcriptions of stone inscription forms. I have adapted only the transcriptions of the original stone inscription forms, which are sufficient here to demonstrate the variability in character structure.

regularity in writing.²⁵ According to Xu Shen himself, “students did not exercise themselves in the art of grammatology; there had not been anyone who understood its teachings for a long time.”

The contrast between ideal and the reality demonstrates the strong normative undertone in Xu Shen’s work. He described Li Si’s reform as the reestablishment of the regular state of writing that was in practice before Confucius’s time but had been eclipsed during the Warring States period. He claimed that Li Si and his associates, by compiling the *Cangjie*, *Yuanli*, and *Boxue* volumes, successfully created a standard that restored the correct state of the script.²⁶ Xu Shen’s basic assumption is obviously that the script was originally standard. He believed that during the Warring States period, this standard has been lost, primarily because of the moral decline of the feudal lords and who did not obey the Zhou king. Then, with the unification of the country, the Qin restored the original world order and re-established the lost standard of the script. From this point of view, there is a potential parallel between the First Emperor and King Xuan, as well as between Li Si and Confucius or Zuo Qiuming 左丘明.

Xu Shen’s description of the sources the Qin used for the creation of the small seal script supports the connection between the First Emperor and King Xuan. In Xu’s view, Li Si and his associates worked from an existing set of characters, the characters of the Historian Zhou, and reorganised the entire script. Accordingly, the Qin small seal script that emerged was a direct descendant of the script in the court of King Xuan, almost 600 years earlier. This view echoes the belief of the Qin who saw themselves as the descendants of the Zhou tradition. Having once lived at the place

²⁵ I am referring here to the passages (translated in Section 6 above) where Xu Shen and Ban Gu quote *Lunyu* 15:25:

Shuowen

Confucius said, “I still seem to remember the times when the historian left empty spaces in the text. Today there is no such thing anymore!” This is a condemnation of not asking when one does not know. When people write according to their own fancy, right and wrong have no constancy, clever teachings and wicked words create doubts among the scholars of the world.

Hanshu

In the old system, documents had to be written with identical characters. If you did not know something, then you left an empty space and asked the elders. Once the world went into decline, right and wrong had no constancy, and people wrote according to their fancy. This is why Confucius said, “I still seem to remember the times when the historian left empty spaces in the text. Today there is no such thing anymore!” He was hurt by the saturation [of writing] with irregularities.

²⁶ It is not exactly known why there were three books with the new standard script. Since all of them were in the same small seal script, there seemed to be a redundancy in creating three works. A possible explanation for the necessity of three books is that they contained characters of different degrees of difficulty and frequency of usage. The *Cangjie pian* was probably the first in order. This is implied by the fact that even after the fall of the Qin empire, the book had been used as an elementary textbook for teaching children how to write. The title points to the same direction: since Cangjie was the inventor of writing, his name was an obvious choice for the title of a beginner’s textbook. The title of the second book was *Yuanli*, where *yuan* meant “to lead on to” and *li* means “to pass through” or “successive”. The two characters together could have designated an intermediary level textbook. The third book, compiled by the Grand Historian himself, was the *Boxue pian*, or the *Book of Wide Learning*. Both the author and the title of the book suggest that it would have contained the difficult and uncommon characters of the small seal script.

of the Western Zhou homeland, the Qin adopted the Zhou script, while the eastern states where most of the philosophic schools of the Warring States thrived wrote in the increasingly diverse regional scripts.²⁷

Although there might have been other standardisations during the Shang and Zhou that we are not aware of, the Qin–Han implementation of a standard script probably began with Li Si’s reforms. Li Si and his associates recorded this script in the *Cangjie*, *Yuanli*, and *Boxue* compendia. Xiao He’s regulations mentioned in the *Shuowen* and the *Hanshu* represented the Han official attempt to eliminate irregularity from official documents. Continuing this tradition, Xu Shen’s dictionary was part of the same effort to create a standard script.

In later centuries, the government also put forward measures directed at the standardisation of the script. Part of these measures was the repeated erection of the stone classics, the first of which happened in the 4th year of the Xiping 熹平 reign period (AD 175), less than a century after compilation of the *Shuowen*. The “Biography of Cai Yong” 蔡邕列傳 in the *Houhanshu* (後漢書) described how Cai Yong 蔡邕 (AD 132–192) came up with the idea of a standard version of the classics.

邕以經籍去聖久遠，文字多謬，俗儒穿鑿，疑誤後學，熹平四年，乃與五官中郎將堂谿典、光祿大夫楊賜、諫議大夫馬日磾、議郎張馴、韓說、太史令單颺等，奏求正定六經文字。靈帝許之，邕乃自書丹於碑，使工鐫刻立於太學門外。於是後儒晚學，咸取正焉。及碑始立，其觀視及摹寫者，車乘日千餘兩，填塞街陌。²⁸

Cai Yong felt that the classics, due to the length of the time since the days of the sages, had suffered many errors in graphs, and that ignorant scholars had made incorrect interpolations, thus misleading scholars in times that followed. Therefore, in 175 CE Cai Yong ... [with a group of other officials] memorialised a request to make a definitive and standard edition of the graphs of the Six Classics. Emperor Ling (181–234 AD) assented. Cai Yong then wrote the texts on the stone tablets, and had workers engrave them and set them up outside the gates of the Imperial Academy. Thereby, future scholars and those who wished to study later would all have access to the correct versions. When the tablets were done and erected, those who came to look at them and copy from them numbered in the thousands of carts daily, blocking the streets and alleys of the city.²⁹

The description claims that the standardisation of the text of the classics was triggered by the character errors in the text and, therefore, was designed to correct those character errors. The carving of an official version of the classics into stone represented a *decision* and an *enforcement* of a standard and not the distillation of

²⁷ Bodde (1938, pp. 151–153). Bodde reiterated Wang Guowei’s earlier view of the Zhou–Qin cultural lineage.

²⁸ *Houhanshu* 50, p. 1990.

²⁹ Translation from Connery (1998, p. 70).

scholarly opinions in textual criticism. By standardising the canon, the government picked *one* textual variant that from there on was going to be used as the authentic text, even though it was only an approximation. But according to the *Houhanshu* account, the main reason for the creation of an official version of the texts was not philological but orthographic. Accordingly, the stone classics served as touchstones for a standard orthography of characters within the classics. This was the reason why later classics used different scripts: the Wei 魏 Three-Script Stone Classics 三體石經 (AD 241) was carved in clerical, small seal, and *guwen* scripts; the Tang 唐 Five-Script Stone Classics 五體石經 (AD 623) in small seal, clerical, regular 楷, running 行, and cursive 草 scripts.

I believe that Xu Shen's compilation of the *Shuowen* represented, similar to the carving of the stone classics, a process of choosing character forms which, from there on, were to be treated as the correct forms. In this sense, the purpose of *Shuowen* was analogous to that of the text of the stone classics. Therefore, the dictionary did not describe the contemporary state of writing but provided an idealised standard. Xu Shen believed that regularity and constancy (*zheng*) was the original state of writing and by establishing a standard he was reinstating this original condition.

7. Conclusions

In this study, I followed two main directions. First, I re-examined the two conventional Han sources, namely in the *Shuowen* "Postface" and the *Hanshu* "Yiwenzhi", with respect to the changes in the script commonly attributed to Li Si and the First Emperor. Second, I contrasted these descriptions with the epigraphic evidence. These examinations lead to the following findings.

The Qin small seal script, as seen on contemporary bronze inscriptions, was different from the small seal script preserved in the *Shuowen*. Moreover, the Qin small seal was not orthographically uniform either, a number of characters occurred on the bronze weights in structurally dissimilar forms. The Mawangdui manuscripts and the Yuanan stele testify that decades after the alleged Qin reform of writing scribal practices were still far from being standardised. In fact, nonstandard writing was an issue even in the Latter Han, as evidenced by the Han laws stipulating that officials who wrote with nonstandard characters should be punished immediately. All these facts show that the Qin reforms were not comprehensive and not always successful. This is also the reason why the Second Emperor had to reissue the edicts about standardisation.

The Han dynasty, when the *Shuowen* and the *Hanshu* were written, was a period of standardisation. People tried to discern the innate order of the universe and map all existing knowledge onto it. The result was a worldview which for the Han people represented a faithful description of the universe. Xu Shen's description of the Qin reforms reflected the same Han belief in a state of original perfection that had once existed in the past. Xu did not believe that the contemporary way of writing represented the true nature of the script. Instead, he thought that the authentic state of the script lay in the past, prior the moral decline of the world. Hence the ability, or

will, to write “correctly” or “in a standard way” (*zheng*) reflected not only the technical level but also the moral standpoint of a scribe.

I am of the opinion, accordingly, that the Qin–Han standardisation represented not a return to an original state of orthographic uniformity but an initial, and not immediately successful, standardisation of earlier writing practices. Just as the Qin did not “re-unify” China (which did not even exist before the fusion of the seven major states into a single military and administrative entity), they did not re-standardise writing either.

One cannot fail, however, that this view of a once existing, then lost and later restored, state of orthographic integrity parallels the traditional view of history according to which the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties followed each other in implementing the Heavenly mandate in the world. Once the rulers of one dynasty lost their Virtue, Heaven conferred the mandate on a new dynasty who overthrew the corrupt system. The victory of the new dynasty was seen not just as an expansion of dominance but as the victory of good over evil, the reinstatement of order in the subcelestial world. Bagley describes the sharp contrast between this world view and the picture emerging from the archaeological evidence:

The civilized world on the eve of the Zhou conquest was large, diverse, and intricately interconnected. In the light of archaeology, therefore, the most striking feature of traditional history is the absence from it of any such world. Transmitted texts present us instead with an ancient China in which the only civilized powers were Zhou and Shang, and with an ancient history in which the principal event was the transfer of rule from one to the other. Ever since the Eastern Zhou period the Zhou conquest has been viewed as an event of towering significance, not because of anything tangible connected with it, such as a building project or a reform of script or a standardization of weight and measures, but because it provided a model for the morally correct transfer of power and for the maintenance of power through dynastic virtue. In that model a unified political order coextensive with civilization was ruled by the Shang until their rule grew oppressive, whereupon the Shang were replaced by the Zhou. This is a distinctly schematic account of the past, one that left us quite unprepared for archaeology’s discovery of a wider civilized world, and if we are to understand its emphases and omissions, we must begin by reminding ourselves that the tradition in which the Zhou figure so centrally is a Zhou creation (*Cambridge History ... 1999, p. 230*).

The traditional view of history thus is gradually changing as new archaeological evidence comes to daylight. We began to realise that the Shang at Anyang were neither the central and nor the dominant civilisation on the Chinese continent and that there were other thriving civilisations not mentioned in historical sources. Similarly, the evolution of Chinese writing cannot be viewed as a process moving from the state of perfection towards disunity and then back to a standard either. Such a model is deficient on both ends: there was no perfection at the beginning and no standard at the end.

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