

Writing as Control, Writing as Morality: Qin Clerical Script and Xu Shen's Philosophy of Writing

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This paper examines Xu Shen's 許慎 *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 and its "Postface" in order to illuminate how Han intellectuals conceptualized the origins and functions of Chinese writing. By analyzing Xu Shen's narrative of script development—from Cang Jie's 倉頡 legendary invention of the "ancient script," through Shi Zhou's large seal script, to the Qin dynasty's small seal and clerical scripts—this study argues that Xu Shen framed the history of writing not as a neutral record but as a moralized genealogy. The central claim is that Xu Shen associated the legitimacy of each script with the character and moral standing of its attributed creator. Cang Jie, with his superhuman vision, epitomized the earliest and most authoritative script, whose purpose was to order society and enable moral education. By contrast, Qin figures such as Li Si 李斯, Hu Wu Jing 胡毋敬, and Zhao Gao 趙高 embodied opportunism, low bureaucratic standing, or outright immorality, thereby rendering the small seal script a compromised though still usable medium. The clerical script, attributed to the judicial official Cheng Miao, was rejected altogether because it originated in administrative expediency rather than ethical cultivation, and thus signified hegemonic rather than kingly governance.

Through cross-textual analysis of transmitted sources and Han commentaries, this paper shows that Xu Shen's philosophy of writing reflects broader Han concerns over the relationship between language, morality, and political order. Ultimately, *Shuowen jiezi* is not merely a philological enterprise but a moral-political project: it positions writing as the foundation of Confucian governance and as a vehicle for sustaining the kingly way.

Keywords: Xu Shen 許慎, *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, Chinese writing system, Clerical script (*lishu* 隸書), Moral-political philosophy

Introduction

This paper centers on the "Postface" of the *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 (Explaining Graphs and Deconstructing Characters, hereafter *Shuowen*) by the Eastern Han scholar Xu Shen 許慎 (c.58-c.148), examining the cultural and political agendas embedded in his narrative of the origins and development of Chinese writing, and how these agendas informed his guiding principles in compiling the *Shuowen*. As its title suggests, this work—required reading for all students of Chinese philology—aims to analyze the structure of the characters it collects, elucidating their meanings through their internal composition, including both the radical (*bushou* 部首) and the remaining components. In the *Shuowen*'s "Postface," Xu Shen offers a traditional account of the

history of the Chinese writing system that emphasizes the sudden and complete invention of each script type: from the ancient script (*guwen* 古文), to the large seal script (*zhouwen* 籀文 or *dazhuan* 大篆), to the small seal script (*xiaozhuan* 小篆 or *qinzhuan* 秦篆), and finally to the clerical script (*lishu* 隸書) in use during his own time. In this portrayal, distinct figures in antiquity are credited with creating entirely new scripts—discontinuous with earlier systems—in order to address the needs of their own times. Recent archaeological and historical research, however, has called this “sudden creation” model into question.¹ While Xu Shen did not originate this account—similar narratives can be found in the “Yiwen zhi” 藝文志 (Treatise on Arts and Letters) of the *Hanshu* 漢書 (History of the Former Han)—it is clear that the model was known to, and accepted by, some Han-dynasty scholars.

As this paper will demonstrate, Xu Shen integrated this inherited narrative into his own philosophy of writing to express his reverence for the earliest forms of script. In his view, later developments in writing represented a progressive departure from the original purpose of writing and contributed to the moral corruption he perceived among contemporary Han officials and scholars. Consequently, Xu Shen urged his contemporaries to use the small seal script, familiar to the scholar-official class, as a point of departure to trace backward to the large seal script and ultimately to the ancient script, for he believed that the teachings of the ancient sages could be recovered only “by working backward through the reforms and changes in writing.”² This concern with forging a meaningful connection between his own time and the past is reflected in the very structure of the *Shuowen*. In the “Postface,” Xu Shen explicitly stated that his method of glossing a character was “to record the small seal script of the present, in combination with the ancient script and the large seal script” 今敘篆文，合以古籀。³ This statement reiterated the *Shuowen*’s retrospective function: taking the small seal script as the point of departure and tracing each character back to its earliest form—the ancient script.

¹ Regarding the origin of Chinese writing, modern sinologists are generally divided into two groups. The first group, represented by scholars such as William Boltz and Robert W. Bagley, suggests that Chinese writing was invented suddenly. See, for example, William Boltz, “The Invention of Writing in China,” *Oriens Extremus* 42.1 (2000): 1–17; Robert W. Bagley, *Anyang Writing and the Origin of the Chinese Writing System* in S. D. Houston, ed., *The First Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 190–249. The second group, represented by scholars like Adam Smith and Paola Demattè, argues that Chinese writing developed gradually into its mature form. See, for example, Adam D. Smith, *Are Writing Systems Intelligently Designed?* in Joshua Englehardt, ed., *Agency in Ancient Writing* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2013), pp. 77–93; Paola Demattè, “The Origins of Chinese Writing: The Neolithic Evidence,” *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 20.2 (2010): 211–228.

² Timothy O’Neill, *Ideography and Chinese Language Theory: A History*, *Welten Ostasiens* 26 (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2016), p. 251.

³ Xu Shen, *Shiwen jiezi zhu* 說文解字注, annotated by Duan Yucai 段玉裁 (Taipei: Yiwen yinshuguan, 2005), 15a.21b.

Two questions arise from this formulation. First, why did Xu Shen so highly esteem the ancient script? Second, why did the *Shuowen* exclude the clerical script, the prevalent script of his day, using instead the small seal script as its starting point? To better understand Xu Shen's compilation logic and his understanding of the development of Chinese writing as a process of decline, this paper will focus on the creators of each script type as presented in this narrative, reconstructing their images—whether historical or mythical—as they were imagined by Han scholars. Although Xu Shen himself devoted little attention to the personal details of these figures, cross-textual comparison reveals that Han intellectuals conceived of them in terms of their identities, knowledge, and moral cultivation. These portrayals suggest a developmental trajectory in which the creation of scripts shifted from the work of extraordinary figures, to that of ordinary men, and eventually to individuals whose moral standing, in a Confucian framework, was suspect.

This interpretive lens explains why Xu Shen, when recounting this narrative, expressed the view that “the older the script, the better,” and why he undertook the composition of the *Shuowen*. In his view, the earliest form of writing most effectively fulfilled the essential function of writing: moral instruction. By contrast, in the traditional account, the scripts used in the Han dynasty were products of the Qin, designed primarily to enhance administrative efficiency and centralize control over the empire, rather than to prioritize moral education. To illustrate this point, the present study follows the sequence of script types recounted in Xu Shen's traditional narrative, examining in turn the depictions of their respective creators in early sources, with particular attention to the “creators” associated with the Qin dynasty. It must be emphasized, however, that this study does not regard the “sudden creation” model presented by Xu Shen and other early Chinese scholars as an accurate reflection of historical reality. Rather, analyzing the *Shuowen*'s use of this traditional narrative provides valuable insight into the intellectual framework of a work that has exerted a profound and enduring influence on Chinese philology.

The Narrative of the “Sudden Creation” Model in the *Shuowen jiezi*

This section examines Xu Shen's account in the *Shuowen* “Postface” of the origins of writing. The focus here is on how, in describing the initial “creation” of script, Xu Shen understood the circumstances that brought writing into existence and the purposes it was meant to serve. Such an understanding of the function of writing will help clarify, in later discussion, why Xu Shen expressed dissatisfaction with the two script forms created under the Qin dynasty.

In Xu Shen's retelling, Cang Jie 倉頡—scribe to the legendary Yellow Emperor—is credited with the invention of Chinese writing. Han-dynasty texts such as the *Huainanzi* 淮南子 and the now-lost *Chuanshu* 傳書 elaborate on this myth, recounting that after Cang Jie created writing, “millet rained from the sky, and ghosts wept at

night” 天雨粟，鬼夜哭。⁴ These supernatural phenomena were interpreted as cosmic responses to the advent of script, which was perceived as a source of disorder and disruption. Although the rationalist thinker Wang Chong 王充 (27 – c. 97), in his *Lunheng* 論衡 (Balanced Inquiries), rejected the idea that these anomalies should be attributed to Cang Jie, he nonetheless portrayed Cang Jie as possessing an extraordinary physical trait—four eyes.⁵ This feature symbolized a superhuman perceptive capacity that enabled him to devise writing. While Xu Shen does not explicitly mention Cang Jie’s four eyes in the *Shuowen* “Postface,” he does emphasize Cang Jie’s exceptional powers of vision, which allowed him to discern the underlying principles of natural patterns and classify phenomena accordingly: “he observed the traces of the footprints and the tracks of birds and beasts, and recognized that their patterns could be distinguished from one another through observation” 見鳥獸蹄迹之跡，知分理之可相別異也。⁶ The script Cang Jie created, in Xu Shen’s account, is what he calls the ancient script.

In Xu Shen’s retelling, what was Cang Jie’s purpose in creating writing? Prior to Cang Jie, Fuxi 伏羲 was said to have created the eight trigrams of the *Yijing* 易經 (Book of Changes) by observing the natural world in order to illustrate its underlying principles, while Shennong 神農氏 was believed to have governed through the use of knotted cords. Yet these earlier symbolic systems were still insufficient to constitute a true writing system. From the outset, such symbols were closely tied to governance, and it was this administrative function that eventually gave rise to the development of a more complex form of writing. Xu Shen then observes that, as human affairs grew increasingly intricate, these earlier systems proved inadequate, prompting the need for a more sophisticated means of recording and organizing knowledge—hence the invention of writing by Cang Jie.

In this developmental trajectory from symbolic forms to a fully developed writing system, script in its earliest conception was regarded as a medium capable of accurately reflecting the underlying principles of things. Xu Shen later emphasized that the reason the earliest writing was called *wen* 文 was that it “imitated the forms of things in the world according to their categories” (*yi lei xiangxing* 依類象形), implying a continuity between the ancient script—the earliest form of writing—and the preexisting symbolic forms. This continuity was not limited to their imitative qualities but extended to their functions as well.

Xu Shen records that, once writing was created, all officials and craftsmen took the writing of the court as the basis for their actions:

⁴ Liu An 劉安, *Huainan honglie jijie* 淮南鴻烈集解 annotated by Liu Wendian 劉文典 (Beijing: Zhonghua shu ju, 2013), 8.252.

⁵ Wang Chong, *Lunheng jiao shi* 論衡校釋, collated and annotated by Huang Hui 黃暉 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), 3.112.

⁶ Xu, *Shiwen jiezi zhu*, 15a.1b.

At the beginning of the creation of writing and tallying, artisans thereby maintained order, and the myriad categories of beings were thereby subjected to scrutiny. This, it is said, derives from the hexagram *Guai* 夬. The line statement reads: “Guai: proclaimed in the royal court.” The meaning is that writing serves to promulgate instruction and clarify transformation within the court of the king. 初造書契。百工以乂，萬品以察，蓋取諸夬。『夬，揚於王庭』言文者，宣教明化於王者朝廷。⁷

Here, the phrase “to proclaim teachings and make transformation manifest” (*xuan jiao ming hua* 宣教明化) explicitly links the invention of writing to moral education. By classifying things through script, writing helped construct an orderly society in which people, guided by the written word, could recognize the norms to be observed, thereby ensuring the maintenance of social order.

The earliest writing was later revised by a scribe (*taishi* 太史) named *Shi Zhou* 史籀, who served during the reign of King Xuan 宣 of Zhou. The script he developed, known as large seal script (*dazhuan* 大篆) in the traditional narrative, was presented in a pedagogical text titled either *Shi Zhou pian* 史籀篇 or *Dazhuan pian* 大篆篇, intended for instructing children in literacy. According to Xu Shen, the script standardized by Shi Zhou differed only slightly from the earlier script attributed to Cang Jie. Neither Xu Shen's *Shuowen jiezi* nor the “Yiwenzhi” of the *Hanshu* explains why Shi Zhou undertook this revision. Nevertheless, it is important to note the similarity between Shi Zhou and Cang Jie. As Xu Shen records, Cang Jie originally served as the *shi* 史, or scribe, to the Yellow Emperor. In other words, both Cang Jie and Shi Zhou held the same official function in the view of Xu Shen and other early imperial scholars who upheld this narrative of the development of the Chinese writing system.

At this point, it is worth briefly clarifying the function of the title *shi* 史 held by both Cang Jie and Shi Zhou. Because the Chinese word *shi* generally means “history” in modern usage, *shi* officials are often assumed to have been primarily responsible for recording past events. Yet, as scholars such as Wang Guowei 王國維 (1877–1927) and Martin Kern have observed, *shi* were in fact high-ranking officials charged with the handling and transmission of written documents. The title *shi* in this sense appears as early as the Shang oracle bone inscriptions. Taking a paleographic approach, Wang Guowei, in his “Shi shi” 釋史 (Interpreting Scribe), argued that *shi* in the Shang and Zhou dynasties were dignitaries responsible for carrying written documents (*chishu zhi ren* 持書之人).⁸ Wang's interpretation accords with Xu Shen's gloss on the

⁷ Xu, *Shiwen jiezi zhu*, 15a.1b

⁸ Wang Guowei 王國維, “Shi shi” 〈釋史〉, in *Guantang jilin* 觀堂集林, collected in *Wang Guowei yishu* 王國維遺書 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1983), vol. 6, 1a–6b. In contrast, Shirakawa

character *shi* in which he defines it as “the official who records affairs” 史，記事者也。⁹ While Wang’s treatment of *shi* in early sources as a custodian of written documents is persuasive, his graphic analysis—aimed at uncovering the original meaning of the word—has been shown by several scholars to have certain flaws. More significantly, Wang’s essay leaves unaddressed the question of what kinds of documents a *shi* was responsible for managing.

This problem is also evident in translating *shi* 史 simply as “scribe,” for such a rendering risks oversimplifying the duties and qualifications associated with the office in early China. As Martin Kern has noted, *shi* as an official title can variously be translated as “scribe,” “clerk,” “historian,” “historiographer,” “archivist,” “ritualist,” or “astrologer,” suggesting that the functions of the office may be rendered differently in English depending on context.¹⁰ A more precise approach, therefore, would be to add a modifier to the English “scribe,” such as “clerical scribe” or “ritual scribe,” in order to specify the duties of a particular *shi*.

The wide range of possible translations reflects not only that *shi* officials handled diverse categories of documents—including legal, military, and astrological records—but also that there was a clear division of labor within the scribal profession, and even a hierarchy. Such internal distinctions are well documented in both archaeological and transmitted sources. Based on the *Zhouli* 周禮 (Rituals of Zhou), a systematic though idealized blueprint of the Western Zhou bureaucracy whose date remains debated, as well as on Western Zhou inscriptions, Kern argues that the highest-ranking *shi* in the Western Zhou was a chief ritualist and royal representative who would read aloud the Zhou kings’ announcements on formal occasions—such as appointments and diplomatic ceremonies—and thus was a figure of considerable stature.¹¹ Moreover, the office of scribe, particularly at the upper levels, was hereditary, as suggested by the inscription on the Basin of Scribe Qiang (*Shi Qiang-pan* 史牆盤). This hereditary nature appears to have persisted into the Han, as Sima Qian’s 司馬遷 (145 or 135

Shizuka 白川靜 (1910–2006) argued that *shi* 史 appeared in the religious and ritual contexts of the Shang and Western Zhou periods.

⁹ Xu, *Shuowen jiezi*, 3b.4b.

¹⁰ Martin Kern, “The Performance of Writing in Western Zhou China,” in Porta S. La and D. Shulman ed., *The Poetics of Grammar and the Metaphysics of Sound and Sign* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), p. 115.

¹¹ Martin Kern, “Offices of Writing and Reading in the *Rituals of Zhou*,” in *Statecraft and Classical Learning: The Rituals of Zhou in East Asian History*, ed. Benjamin A. Elman and Martin Kern (Boston: Brill, 2010), p. 83. In contrast to Kern, Tsang Wing Ma argues that the *shi* 史 in the *Rituals of Zhou* could have been no more than a Middle Grandee (*zhong dafu* 中大夫), and that the description of the *shi* in this text does not perfectly cohere with their role in Western Zhou bronze inscriptions. The *Rituals of Zhou*, Ma further suggests, reflects more the transitional status of the *shi* in the Zhou–Qin period than the actual situation in the Western Zhou. See Tsang Wing Ma, “Scribes in Early Imperial China” (PhD diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 2017), pp. 42–44.

B.C.E.–?) recollection of his own family history implies.¹² If Han intellectuals' conception of the status of scribes in the Zhou era was informed primarily by the *Zhouli*—a text that Liu Xin 劉歆 and Xu Shen certainly read—then Shi Zhou's role and image in the myth of the invention of the large seal script can be understood in light of the *Zhouli*'s portrayal of the office.

As Xu Shen himself notes, Shi Zhou served at the time as a *taishi*, or Director of Scribes, indicating that he was the leader of a corps of scribes and thus an official capable of handling a wide variety of documents. Collectively, these documents formed an integral part of the Zhou dynasty's civilization and ritual system, a heritage that Confucius 孔子 greatly esteemed. Shi Zhou, therefore, may be regarded as one of the most vital custodians of this cultural legacy. Nevertheless, Xu Shen records that when Confucius compiled and edited the Six Classics, he did not employ the large seal script attributed to Shi Zhou. Instead, he relied on its precursor—the ancient script—to complete his work. Xu Shen offers no explicit explanation for why Confucius insisted on using the ancient script rather than the large seal script. However, he remarks of the characters in the Classics that “their meaning can be discerned and explained” 其意可得而說也,¹³ suggesting that the meaning of individual characters could be understood directly from their graphic form. Xu Shen's assessment was likely influenced by texts said to have been discovered in the walls of Confucius's former residence, as well as by various bronze inscriptions unearthed in different regions—both of which, in Xu Shen's discourse, were written in what he termed the ancient script.¹⁴ More importantly, when read in conjunction with the earlier discussion of how Cang Jie's writing system was designed to clarify the underlying principles of phenomena, one may infer that, within Xu Shen's discourse, Confucius's choice to employ the ancient script in compiling the Six Classics was motivated by a desire to ensure that the universal principles embedded in the Classics could be most accurately conveyed through the earliest form of writing. This, in turn, suggests that—even though Shi Zhou lived during the Western Zhou period, which Confucius greatly admired, and was fully capable of managing all types of documents—the script he developed was, in Xu Shen's view, still not the most ideal vehicle for preserving cultural and moral truths, and therefore remained inferior to Cang Jie's ancient script. Nevertheless, given that the large seal script represented only a slight modification of

¹² See Sima Qian 司馬遷, *Shiji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), 130. 3285-3322.

¹³ Xu, *Shuowen jiezi*, 15a.9b.

¹⁴ According to Zhang Fuhai 張富海, the “ancient script” (*guwen* 古文) recorded in Han sources actually referred to the forms of writing that were widely employed in the pre-imperial territorial states of Lu 魯 and Qi 齊, corresponding to modern Shandong 山東 Province. Zhang further argues that these forms were also influenced by the script traditions of Chu 楚. His study suggests that the history of script development as recounted by Xu Shen and his contemporaries was historically inaccurate. See Zhang Fuhai 張富海, *Hanren suowei guwen zhi yanjiu* 漢人所謂古文之研究 (Beijing: Xianzhuang shuju, 2007), pp. 305–327.

the ancient script, it still played an intermediary role in Xu Shen's estimation, serving as a means for scholars to trace their way back to the earliest form of writing.

The Qin “Creators” and the Functional Shift of Writing

Building on the preceding analysis of the ancient script and large seal script in Xu Shen's retelling, this section examines how the general images of the small seal script's creators in Han texts shaped Xu Shen's attitude toward this script. As we will see, Xu Shen neither wholly rejected the small seal script—as he did the clerical script—nor fully embraced it. Like the large seal script, the small seal script served to help scholars trace their way back to the ancient script. Yet in Xu Shen's estimation, its status was notably lower. The primary reason lies in the highly ambivalent images of its creators, which, in Xu Shen's view, marked the point at which writing began to lose its original function as a vehicle for moral education.

According to Xu Shen's retelling, the evolution of Chinese writing underwent a marked bifurcation after the Western Zhou. As he observed, the proliferation of semi-autonomous regional states produced pronounced regional variants of script: a single graph were written in several distinct forms. This situation of locale-specific graphic variants persisted until the Qin unification. Acting on the advice of his Chancellor Li Si 李斯 (280? – 208 B.C.E), the First Emperor of Qin abolished all scripts that diverged from the writing current in the state of Qin. Li Si, together with Zhao Gao 趙高 (c. 257– 207 B.C.E) and Hu Wujing 胡毋敬 (fl. 2nd century B.C.E),¹⁵ therefore compiled three normative manuals—*Cang Jie pian* 倉頡篇, *Yuanli pian* 爰歷篇, and *Boxue pian* 博學篇—to standardize the graphs in use. The codified script was thereafter called small-seal script as its shapes were reduced and regularized from the large-seal script described in the *Shizhou pian* 史籀篇. As the phrase “with certain modifications and changes” (*huo po shenggai* 或頗省改) suggested, the new script was both more compact and easier to write, having eliminated a certain number of strokes of the large-seal script.

To what extent was the small seal script different from the large seal script? Duan Yucai 段玉裁 (1735–1815), one of the most important and renowned commentators on the *Shuowen*, observed that among the 9,353 small seal characters included in the *Shuowen*, only about 10–20 percent were abbreviated or altered from the large seal script and the ancient script. This indicates that the majority of the characters recorded in the *Shuowen* had preserved their earlier forms or were still known to people in Xu Shen's time:

¹⁵ See also Ban Gu 班固, *Hanshu* 漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shu ju, 1962), 30.1721.

To the ancient characters and the Zhou characters, the small seal characters either followed them or changed them. Around 80 – 90% small seal characters in the *Shuowen* followed both [ancient characters and Zhou characters], while only around 10 – 20% small seal characters in the *Shuowen* abbreviated and changed [the ancient characters and the Zhou characters] 小篆之於古、籀，或仍之，或改之。仍者十之八九、省改者十之一二而已。¹⁶

In other words, in terms of its continuity with the ancient script and the large seal script, the small seal script remained a dependable link. This was especially crucial in Xu Shen's time, for he argued that the ancient script had become extinct following the burning of the books catastrophe (古文由此絕矣). Only with the discovery of the Classics—believed to have been written in the ancient script—within the walls of Confucius's former residence could Xu Shen and other scholars compare the two forms of writing, discern their differences, and determine the shapes of the ancient script.

Why, then, did this continuity between the small seal script and the ancient script exist, and why was it absent in the case of the clerical script, as will be discussed in the next section? In Xu Shen's narrative, this continuity depended on the creators of the small seal script. Their characteristics enabled the small seal script—though imperfect—to serve as a key through which Xu Shen and other Han scholar-officials, even in an age when the small seal script had completely supplanted the ancient script, could still grasp the ancient script's graphic forms and the underlying principles they embodied. For this reason, the following discussion will examine how Han sources portray the three creators of the small seal script, and will explore how the images of these figures, as known to Han scholars, may have shaped Xu Shen's contradictory attitude toward the script.

Li Si: A Utilitarian Inventor Obsessed with Power

As the figure credited with proposing to the First Emperor the unification of the various regional scripts, and as one of the creators of the small seal script, Li Si was far from uncontroversial. A survey of the extant records on Li Si allows us to summarize his image as follows: (1) a disciple of Xunzi 荀子; (2) a perceptive adviser who counseled against driving away non-Qin talents; (3) an iconoclastic Legalist who dismissed the wisdom of the ancient sages; (4) the instigator of the cultural catastrophe of burning classical texts and burying scholars (*fen shu keng ru* 焚書坑儒); (5) an accomplice of Zhao Gao; and (6) ultimately, a loser in his political struggle against Zhao Gao—to name only a few facets. From these characteristics, it is clear that Han writings assign to Li Si an inescapable share of the responsibility for the Qin dynasty's

¹⁶ Xu, *Shiwen jiezi zhu*, 1a.1b.

swift collapse. At the same time, however, Han sources also reflect Li Si's regard for ancient traditions. This is exemplified in a passage from the "Yueshu" 樂書 (Book of Music) in the *Shiji* 史記 (Records of the Grand Scribe), in which we encounter a portrayal of Li Si that contradicts the more familiar, negative image.

In tracing the history of music, the "Yueshu" records that, during his political struggle with his former accomplice Zhao Gao, Li Si admonished the Second Emperor against abandoning the *Songs* and *Documents* and forgetting the lessons of the Shang dynasty:

The Second Emperor particularly took music as a form of entertainment. The chancellor Li Si presented his remonstrance, saying: "To abandon the *Shi* and *Shu*, and to devote oneself entirely to [lascivious] sounds and seductive beauty—these were what Zu Yi feared. To disregard small faults until they accumulate, and to indulge oneself throughout the night—these were the reasons for the downfall of King Zhou of Shang." Zhao Gao replied: "The names of the music of the Five Thearchs and the Three Kings were all different, indicating that their music did not imitate that of their predecessors. From the imperial court down to the common people, all can partake of joy and join in deep affections. Without such harmonious music, joy cannot be shared, and the ruler's benevolence cannot be widely disseminated. Each is the teaching of its own age and the music appropriate to its own time. Why should one insist on obtaining the swift horse Lu'er from Mount Hua before beginning a long journey?" The Second Emperor agreed with Zhao Gao. 秦二世尤以為娛。丞相李斯進諫曰：「放棄《詩》《書》，極意聲色，祖伊所以懼也；輕積細過，恣心長夜，紂所以亡也。」趙高曰：「五帝、三王樂各殊名，示不相襲。上自朝廷，下至人民，得以接歡喜，合殷勤，非此和說不通，解澤不流，亦各一世之化，度時之樂，何必華山之騶耳而後行遠乎？」二世然之。¹⁷

What is most striking in this passage is the portrayal of Li Si, which contradicts his usual image as a representative of the so-called Legalists in the early imperial period—figures who, like his contemporary Han Fei, regarded the experience of the past as devoid of value and therefore advocated its rejection.¹⁸ In this exchange, it is instead

¹⁷ Sima, *Shiji*, 24.1177.

¹⁸ Derk Bodde preferred to interpret Li Si not as a philosopher but as a statesman. Nevertheless, the presumption that Li Si belonged to the so-called "Legalist" (*fajia* 法家) tradition in early imperial China has continued to exert influence on modern Chinese scholarship. Over the past century, for example, Hsiao Kung-ch'uan 蕭公權 and Lu Xun 魯迅 both examined Legalism and Li Si's writings within this framework. Hsiao argued that Li Si marked the decline of pre-Qin Legalism, while Lu Xun emphasized the distinctiveness of Li Si's literary style in comparison with other Legalists. In more recent scholarship, Chai Yongchang 柴永昌 contends that Li Si's *Duze shu* 督責書 distorted the Legalist

Zhao Gao who adopts the stance of an iconoclastic Legalist, while Li Si appears as a defender of the classical tradition.

Li Si's reference to the *Shi* 詩 and *Shu* 書 in the above passage, along with his allusions to examples from the Shang dynasty, suggests his familiarity with ancient learning. Elsewhere, as Derk Bodde has noted, Li Si also employed historical precedents in his reasoning.¹⁹ One such example occurs in his prison remonstrance, where he stressed the importance of drawing lessons from the ancient sage-kings:

All the ancient sage-kings regulated their food and drink, fixed the number of their carriages and implements, set limits to their palaces and residences, and prohibited the issuing of orders or undertaking projects that increased expense without benefiting the people; thus they were able to maintain peace and security over the long term 凡古聖王，飲食有節，車器有數，宮室有度，出令造事，加費而無益於民利者禁，故能長久治安。²⁰

If Li Si was, as Bodde describes, a typical Legalist statesman and an anti-cultural figure,²¹ why did he admonish the Second Emperor against dismissing the lessons of the past? How might the tension between these contrasting images—found in both the *Shiji* narratives and other Han writings—inform our understanding of Li Si's role in shaping Xu Shen's opinion on the nature of the small seal script?

It is certain that, for Han scholars including Xu Shen, Li Si possessed at least a basic, and perhaps a sufficiently broad, knowledge of ancient wisdom, allegedly inherited from his master Xunzi. As Sima Qian observed, “[Li] Si knew the origin of the Six Arts” 斯知六藝之歸。²² Although modern scholars have cast doubt on the teacher–student relationship between Han Fei 韓非 and Xunzi, Masayuki Sato has argued convincingly that, among Xunzi's five alleged disciples, Li Si's connection to Xunzi is the most credible.²³ Sima Qian, for instance, refers to this relationship three times and specifically states in Li Si's biography that what Li Si had learned from Xunzi was

tradition that had been transmitted from Shen Buhai 申不害. See Chai Yongchang 柴永昌, “Lun Li Si Duze shu yu fajia sixiang zhi yi” 論李斯《督責書》與法家思想之異, *Guanzi xuekan* 管子學刊 2 (2019), pp. 36–41.

¹⁹ Derk Bodde, *China's First Unifier A Study of the Ch'in Dynasty as Seen in the Life of Li Ssü (280?-208 B.C.)* (Leiden: Brill, 1938), pp. 223-224.

²⁰ Sima, *Shiji*, 87.2560.

²¹ Bodde, *China's First Unifier*, p. 211.

²² Sima, *Shiji*, 87.2583.

²³ Masayuki Sato, *The Confucian Quest for Order: The Origin and Formation of the Political Thought of Xunzi* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), p. 64.

“the arts of being rulers” (*diwang zhi shu* 帝王之術).²⁴ On the basis of the extant *Xunzi*, these arts of rulership need not be equated with the “Legalist” doctrines of Shen Buhai 申不害 and Shen Dao 慎到, which emphasized reinforcing the ruler’s power; rather, they placed an emphasis on employing ritual to secure social order—an approach that is characteristic and representative of Xunzi’s political philosophy.

However, the *Xunzi* itself preserves evidence of Li Si’s reluctance to embrace certain aspects of his master’s thought. The “Yi bing” 議兵 (On Warfare) chapter records a dialogue between Li Si and Sun Qingzi 孫卿子 (i.e., Xunzi). In this exchange, Li Si contends that the reason for Qin’s success, which had lasted for four generations, lay not in its practice of benevolence and correctness (*yi* 義) but in its ability to seize the advantages afforded by circumstance. Sun Qing, dissatisfied with this argument, responded by stressing the primacy of benevolence and correctness as “the roots” (*ben* 本), and criticized Li Si for focusing solely on the advantages of circumstance, which he labeled “the tip” (*mo* 末).²⁵ The precise date of this dialogue’s composition is uncertain, and it may have been written with the intention of highlighting Li Si’s divergence from his master’s thought. In any case, the purported teacher–student relationship likely gave Han scholars the impression that, regardless of Li Si’s disagreement with Xunzi’s philosophy—rooted in the wisdom of the Former Kings—he was nonetheless trained to master and understand the ancient wisdom preserved in certain classical texts.

Other transmitted Han sources suggest that Li Si’s contradictory behavior—on the one hand recommending to the First Emperor the destruction of the very classical texts he may once have studied, and on the other admonishing the Second Emperor not to forget them—was largely driven by self-interest. Many of Li Si’s subversive proposals, including his recommendation of the Qin bibliocaust, stemmed from his desire to secure his own power and status, resulting in the contradictory actions recorded in the *Shiji*. He Lingxu 賀凌虛, in his study of Li Si’s political thought and policies, has argued that Li Si would not hesitate to obliterate historical traditions, philosophical teachings, or legal statutes whenever they obstructed his pursuit of power.²⁶ He’s observation aptly explains the contradiction noted above: Han sources repeatedly portray Li Si’s obsession with power as the root cause of many, if not all, of his actions. This is exemplified in the farewell he gave to his master, when he explained his decision to travel to Qin—which he believed had the potential to conquer and unify the world—as a means to free himself from servility and to pursue the glory and status

²⁴ Sima Qian’s *Shiji* records this connection between Li Si and Xunzi (87.2539). The *Yan tie lun* also preserves a reference to their relationship, mentioned in the speech of a Grand Master of Censors, suggesting that this association was already in general circulation among Han intellectuals and officials. See Kuan Huan 桓寬, *Yan tie lun jiao zhu* 鹽鐵論校注, vol. 4 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1992), p. 229.

²⁵ See *Xunzi ji jie*, 10.280–281.

²⁶ He Lingxu 賀凌虛, “Li Si de zhengzhi sixiang” 李斯的政治思想, *Si yu yan* 思與言 6.2 (1968): 37–41.

to which he aspired.²⁷ Another telling example of his utilitarianism is his eloquent and ornate memorial persuading King Zheng of Qin not to expel all non-Qin scholars. Li Si's true motive, however, was personal: had the expulsion been carried out, he himself—listed among those to be dismissed (“Li Si's name was also among those to be expelled.” 李斯議亦在逐中)—would have been deprived of any opportunity to realize the ambitions he had proclaimed in his farewell to Xunzi.²⁸

As it stands, the question that follows is: how could the burning of classical texts and the burying of *Ru* scholars serve to secure Li Si's power? Modern scholarship has clarified that the traditional portrayals of the Qin bibliocaust and the mass execution of *Ru* scholars are exaggerated and therefore historically questionable.²⁹ Even in the transmitted narratives, Li Si's motivation for proposing the bibliocaust was not to eradicate all texts from the past, but rather to confine them to the imperial archives, where they could be completely controlled and monopolized by the central government.³⁰ A careful reading of the accounts in Li Si's biography and in Wang Chong's *Lunheng* reveals that Li Si's primary motive was to counter the proposal of Chunyu Yue 淳于越, who had urged the First Emperor to respect historical precedent and to revive the practice of enfeoffment.³¹ In refuting Chunyu Yue, Li Si argued that contemporary conditions differed from those of antiquity, and thus there was no reason

²⁷ Sima, *Shiji*, 87.2539.

²⁸ Sima, *Shiji*, 87.2541.

²⁹ See, for example, Ulrich Neininger, “Burying the Scholars Alive: On the Origin of a Confucian Martyrs' Legend,” in Wolfram Eberhard and Krzysztof Gawlikowski, eds., *Nation and Mythology* (München: Simon & Magiera, 1983), pp. 121–136; Li Kaiyuan 李開元, “Fenshu kengru de zhenwei xushi—Banzhuang weizao de lishi” 焚書坑儒的真偽虛實——半樁偽造的歷史, *Shixue jikan* 史學集刊 6 (2010): 36–47. Indeed, already in the Song dynasty, among others, Zheng Qiao 鄭樵 (1104–1162) asseverated in his “Qin bujue ruxue lun” 秦不絕儒學論 (On the Qin Did Not Wipe Out Confucian Teaching):

In the times of Qin, [the imperial government] did not abandon the use of *ru* scholars and Classical learning. Furthermore, when Shusun Tong surrendered to the Han, he himself had about a hundred disciples. The custom in the Qi-Lu area was also not replaced. Therefore, after the death of Xiang Yu, Lu was a state which preserved the moral principles and rituals. We then know that in the times of Qin, [the imperial government] did not abandon *ru* scholars, and probably those whom the First Emperor buried were people whose arguments conflicted with [those of the First Emperor] for a short while. 秦時未嘗不用儒生與經學也。況叔孫通降漢時，自有弟子百餘人。齊魯之風亦未嘗替。故項羽既亡之後，而魯為守節禮義之國。則知秦時未嘗廢儒，而始皇所坑者，蓋一時議論不合者耳。

See Zheng Qiao 鄭樵, “Qin bujue ruxue lun” 秦不絕儒學論, in *Tongzhi ershi lue* 通志二十略 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1995), 71.1803.

³⁰ Bodde, *China's First Unifier*, p. 164.

³¹ Sima, *Shiji*, 87. 2546-7; Wang, *Lunheng jiao shi*, 7.355-356.

to restore old practices. Because private scholarship promoted the ideas Chunyu Yue advocated and was too widespread to control, Li Si persuaded the Emperor to burn the classical texts and execute those scholars who secretly kept them. Notably, this debate—leading to the subsequent bibliocaust—took place in the thirty-fourth year of the First Emperor's reign (213 B.C.), roughly eight years after the Qin unification. This eight-year interval suggests that, in Li Si's view, the destruction of private learning was not an urgent priority; it became a political strategy only when Chunyu Yue's challenge threatened Li Si's authority.

If we interpret Li Si's advocacy of the bibliocaust as driven by anxiety over losing political power, his apparent inconsistency becomes more intelligible. Han sources indicate that, after the Second Emperor's accession, Zhao Gao and Li Si engaged in a political struggle in which Li Si was ultimately executed following his defeat. His remonstrance in the "Yueshu" can thus be read as an effort to oppose Zhao Gao, his chief rival, whom he regarded as misleading the Emperor. From this perspective, Li Si's regard for ancient wisdom was purely instrumental: he did not deeply value it for its own sake, but would invoke it whenever doing so served his political ends.

On this reading, Li Si appears less as an ideological iconoclast intent on dismantling tradition, and more as a self-serving opportunist whose overriding concern was personal gain. Han scholars remembered his greed as the cause of his downfall and execution.³² Yet, for all his opportunism, he was also acknowledged to possess a working knowledge of ancient traditions. Thus, from the perspective of Han intellectuals, Li Si's role in creating the small seal script was not aimed at eradicating ancient wisdom; rather, the script's preservation of certain archaic elements may, in part, have owed to his involvement.

Huwu Jing 胡毋敬 : A Keeper of Ancient Tradition

As for the second creator, Huwu Jing, his contribution to the invention of Qin seal script is hard to be determined. There are only two occurrences of Huwu Jing in the entire corpus of extant Han sources: the first is in the "Yiwen zhi" and the second is in the "Postface" of the *Shuowen*, and both occurrences, which are too concise in regarding their wordings, are related merely to the invention of the Qin seal script. This lack of information prevents us from any fair judgement on Huwu Jing's purported role in this invention.

Although we know very little about Huwu Jing, his position as Director of the Grand Scribes—bearing the same title as Shi Zhou's—was nonetheless significant in the invention of the small seal script. As noted in the previous section's analysis of the role of scribes in ancient China, this was an office that oversaw multiple subordinates

³² This obsession with power of Li Si was generally acknowledged in Han discourse. In the debate held in 81 B.C., the reformists concluded the death of Li Si as follows: "Li Si was greedy for what he desired, but this greed led to what he hated" 李斯貪其所欲, 致其所惡. See Kuan, *Yan tie lun jiao zhu*, 4.231.

responsible for handling all types of writing within the government. However, despite its prestige in the Western Zhou dynasty, the position of scribe declined in importance after the relocation of the Zhou capital. As Tsang Wing Ma has argued, by the early imperial period many scribes were ranked at or below the middle levels of the official hierarchy. Even when the position of Director of the Grand Scribes remained hereditary, as Sima Qian's case suggests, it no longer carried high prestige in the Western Han.³³ Sima Qian himself received only six hundred *shi* 石 of grain per month, whereas a mid-level official in the Han bureaucracy, as recorded in the *Hanshu*, earned two thousand *shi*.³⁴ Sima Qian's situation was by no means unique but representative of the general standing of the Director of the Grand Scribes throughout Han history. In light of this historical context, we may reasonably assume that Cang Jie, scribe to the Yellow Emperor, and Shi Zhou, scribe to King Xuan of Zhou, were eminent figures in their respective eras, whereas Huwu Jing, by contrast, was only a relatively insignificant official in the Qin court.

Huwu Jing's relatively low rank can also be inferred from circumstantial and indirect evidence. After the Qin unification, the First Emperor was said to have visited seven mountains in the newly conquered territories.³⁵ The "Qin Shi Huang benji" 秦始皇本紀 (Annals of the First Emperor of Qin) in the *Shiji* recorded that the Emperor instructed his chancellor Li Si to compose and inscribe seven eulogies, one for each mountain.³⁶ These were important imperial events directly involving state inscriptions, yet they took place without the participation of the Director of the Grand Scribes—or, more precisely, without Huwu Jing himself—who, in theory, should have accompanied the emperor and been responsible for writing the inscriptions. Huwu Jing's silence in the extant Han sources states that his status and power were incompatible with that of both Li Si and Zhao Gao.

Although Huwu Jing's position as Director of the Grand Scribes did not carry the same political weight as Li Si's or Zhao Gao's, his broad and profound scribal knowledge nevertheless strengthened the continuity of the small seal script with its predecessors—the ancient and large seal scripts—and thus allowed the small seal script to serve as a conduit through which its users could access the ancient form of a

³³ Tsang Wing Ma, "Scribes in Early Imperial China," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Santa Barbara, 2017), p. 51, p. 60.

³⁴ Ibid, pp. 73-74.

³⁵ According to the *Annals of the First Emperor*, the Emperor visited the mountains respectively in the 28th, 29th, 32nd, and 37th years of his reign. See Sima, *Shiji*, 6.242–262. However, as Martin Kern mentioned, the records of the *Annals* were somewhat confused. See Martin Kern, *The Stele Inscriptions of Ch'in Shih-huang: Text and Ritual in Early Chinese Imperial Representation* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 2000), p. 1.

³⁶ Martin Kern argues that the stele inscriptions, as a series of texts, were already composed before his visits. See Martin Kern, *The Stele Inscriptions of Ch'in Shih-huang: Text and Ritual in Early Chinese Imperial Representation*. His monograph also provides a complete annotated translation of the seven stele inscriptions.

character. As head of the scribal offices, Huwu Jing would have been capable of overseeing all types of documents essential to the operation of the empire. These documents would not have been limited to administrative records but would also have included texts that culturally sustained the empire and connected it to the legacy of high antiquity. In this sense, the Director of the Grand Scribes was expected to be the most literate of the *shi* office-holders, in both cultural and administrative terms. The title of Huwu Jing's work, *Boxue pian*, aptly reflects his erudition. Thus, although we lack concrete biographical details about Huwu Jing, his official title implies a strong continuity with the past—likely inherited through family tradition—and sets him apart from other officials, such as the *shi* Cheng Miao discussed below, who were versed only in statutes and ordinances. In Xu Shen's framework, Huwu Jing's office, erudition, and familiarity with ancient knowledge function as metaphors for the ancient elements preserved in the small seal script.

Zhao Gao: An Inventor Who Used Language Improperly

The two creators discussed above—Li Si and Huwu Jing—both possessed a certain degree of familiarity with ancient traditions and with some of the classical texts. This familiarity helps explain why the small seal script did not differ significantly from the earlier ancient and large seal scripts: only about 20 percent of the characters recorded in the *Shuowen* diverge from those earlier forms. Nevertheless, for Xu Shen the small seal script was not the most perfect or ideal form of writing. Its imperfection lay partly in the fact that, unlike Cang Jie, its creators were ordinary men, but more importantly in the moral character of those creators. As analyzed above, Li Si—despite his knowledge of ancient traditions—was an opportunist and an egotist.

The third creator of the small seal script, the eunuch Zhao Gao, was arguably the most vicious of the three.³⁷ In the extant Han sources, he receives no positive assessment, being universally regarded as one of the principal culprits in the fall of the Qin dynasty. Zhao Gao falsified the testamentary edict of the First Emperor,³⁸ engineering the accession of the Second Emperor Huhai 胡亥 (r. 210–207 B.C.). This coup effectively deprived the Qin of its last opportunity for survival.³⁹ His subsequent dictatorship at court led later narratives to liken him to earlier wicked ministers who

³⁷ Michael Loewe, “On the Terms *bao zi*, *yin gong*, *yin guan*, *huan*, and *shou*: Was Zhao Gao a Eunuch?,” *T'oung Pao* 91.4/5 (2005): 301–319.

³⁸ See Sima, *Shiji*, 6.264; 87.2548, for their plot to rewrite the First Emperor's dying words and to kill the Prince Fusu 扶蘇. Derk Bodde, however, suggested that this may only be a scenario imagined by Sima Qian. See Bodde, *China's First Unifier*, p. 111.

³⁹ Elisa Levi Sabattini, for example, in her analysis of Jia Yi's 賈誼 (200–168 B.C.) “To Surpass the Qin” (“Guo Qin lun” 過秦論), argues that one of the reasons for the decline of the Qin. See Elisa Levi Sabattini, “How to Surpass the Qin: On Jia Yi's Intentions in the Guo Qin lun,” *Monumenta Serica* 65.2 (2017): 263–284.

had precipitated the collapse of past dynasties.⁴⁰ In the *Shiji* and other Han philosophical texts, Zhao Gao's name is frequently accompanied by a cluster of negative terms—*xie* 邪 (“evil”), *wang* 亡 (“destruction”), *huo* 惑 (“confusion”), *wei* 危 (“danger”), and *luan* 亂 (“disorder”).⁴¹ As noted above, Han scholars, including Xu Shen, shared a common belief that the original purpose of writing was to govern the world and bring it into order. The vocabulary associated with Zhao Gao, by contrast, embodies the antithesis of this function. As Timothy Michael O'Neill has observed, the ordering of the state and the ordering of language were inextricably linked.⁴² From this perspective, the political disorder and chaos Zhao Gao engendered may have shaped the way Xu Shen characterized the Qin seal script in his narrative of the development of writing—regarding it as a form of script that was morally flawed.

Among the examples of political chaos attributed to Zhao Gao, two are of particular significance for understanding his role as one of the inventors of the Qin seal script. The first is the well-known anecdote of “calling a deer a horse” (*zhi lu wei ma* 指鹿為馬), briefly recorded in the “Qin Shi Huang benji” in the *Shiji*. This episode not only illustrates Zhao Gao's malice and his usurpation of Qin state power, but also reveals his calculated manipulation of language—misrepresenting reality through the misuse and distortion of words—thereby undermining the very principle of “rectifying names” (*zhengming* 正名):⁴³

⁴⁰ For instance, in his biography in the *History of the Later Han*, Kong Rong 孔融 compared Zhao Gao to Susha Wei 夙沙衛 and Huiqiang Yili 惠牆伊戾, who caused disorders to the states of Qi and Song in the Spring and Autumn period. See Fan, *Hou Hanshu*, 70.2266. A parallel is also seen in Fang Xuanling 房玄齡, *Jinshu* 晉書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1997), 30.921. Indeed, already in a warning presented to the Second Emperor, Li Si had compared Zhao Gao with Tian Chang 田常 and Zi Han 子罕, who betrayed their superiors. See Sima, *Shiji*, 87.2559–2560.

⁴¹ For *xie* (evil), see Yang Xiong 揚雄, *Fayan yishu* 法言義疏, commented and annotated by Wang Rongbao 汪榮寶 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1997), 15.382. For *wang* (destruction), see Kuan Huan 桓寬, *Yantie lun jiaozhu* 鹽鐵論校注, collated and annotated by Wang Liqi 王利器 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2017), 2.94; Liu Xiang 劉向, *Shuoyuan xiaozheng* 說苑校證, collated and annotated by Xiang Zonglu 向宗魯 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987), 8.174; Liu An 劉安, *Huainan honglie jijie* 淮南鴻烈集解, annotated by Liu Wendian 劉文典 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2013), 20.683. For *huo* (confusion), see Liu Xiang 劉向, *Xinxu jiaoshi* 新序校釋, collated and annotated by Shi Guangying 石光瑛 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2001), 5.742. For *wei* (danger), see *Hanshu*, 27b.1400; Fan Ye 范曄, *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), 78.2526. For *luan* (disorder), see *Shiji*, 6.273; *Hanshu*, 27b.1430; *ibid.*, 75.3162, 3165; Wang Fu 王符, *Qianfu lun jian jiaozheng* 潜夫論箋校正, commented by Wang Jipei 汪繼培, collated and annotated by Peng Duo 彭鐸 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2014), 2.58.

⁴² O'Neill, *Ideography and Chinese Language Theory*, p. 180.

⁴³ For the translation of *zhengming* as “proper use of language,” see Roger T. Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2011), p. 100.

On the *jihai* day of the eighth month, Zhao Gao was about to cause disorder but feared that the other officials would not obey him. He therefore tested their obedience first. He brought a deer and presented it to the Second Emperor, saying, “This is a horse.” The Second Emperor laughed and said, “Chancellor, have you made a mistake in calling a deer a horse?” The Emperor then asked the officials around him. Some remained silent; some said it was a horse in order to curry favor with Zhao Gao; others said it was a deer. Later, Zhao Gao secretly used the law to frame those who had said it was a deer. Thereafter, all the officials feared [Zhao] Gao. 八月己亥, 趙高欲為亂, 恐羣臣不聽, 乃先設驗, 持鹿獻於二世, 曰:「馬也。」二世笑曰:「丞相誤邪? 謂鹿為馬。」問左右, 左右或默, 或言馬以阿順趙高。或言鹿(者), 高因陰中諸言鹿者以法。後羣臣皆畏高。⁴⁴

Zhao Gao’s deliberate pairing of two entirely different zoological categories (horse and deer) with their respective written graphs signals his ulterior aim of consolidating his illegitimate power. While the *Shiji*, in which this anecdote appears, was not as widely circulated in the Han dynasty as it would be in later imperial China,⁴⁵ a passage in the biography of Dou Rong 竇融 (16 B.C.–62 A.D.) in the *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書 (*History of the Later Han*) suggests that Han audiences were already familiar with both the story and its connotations of willful misrepresentation and deception. In this account, Emperor Zhang of Han (Liu Da 劉烜, r. 75–88) rebuked Dou Xian 竇憲 (?–92) for deceiving him when they passed the garden of Princess Liu Zhi 劉致 (?–c. 38), which Dou Xian had purchased at a low price from the princess. In his reprimand, the emperor compared Dou Xian’s deceit to Zhao Gao’s “calling a deer a horse” (*he yong yu Zhao Gao zhi lu wei ma* 何用愈趙高指鹿為馬).⁴⁶ This reference indicates that the idiomatic meaning of the anecdote—deliberately misrepresenting reality and distorting truth for hidden purposes—was well established and readily understood in the Han period.

The second example that further illustrates Zhao Gao’s violation of the doctrine of proper language use—a fundamental principle of Chinese linguistic thought, as Timothy Michael O’Neill has noted⁴⁷—is found in both the “Qin Shi Huang benji”

⁴⁴ Sima, *Shiji*, 6.273.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Chen Zhi 陳直, “Han Jin ren dui Shiji de chuanbo ji qi pingjia” 漢晉人對史記的傳播及其評價, *Sichuan daxue xuebao (shehui kexue ban)* 四川大學學報 (社會科學版) 3 (1957): 41–57.

⁴⁶ Fan Ye 范曄, *Hou Hanshu* 後漢書 (Beijing, Zhonghua shuju, 1965), 23.812.

⁴⁷ O’Neill, *Ideography and Chinese Language Theory*, pp. 177–188.

and in the biography of Li Si.⁴⁸ Since the two accounts are parallel with only minor textual differences, I cite here the version in Li Si's biography, which is more elaborate and detailed:

At the outset, when Zhao Gao served as Director of the Palace Attendants, he had killed many and settled numerous personal vendettas. Fearing that high ministers, when granted audience with the throne, might denounce him, he persuaded the Second Emperor as follows, "The reason the Son of Heaven is revered is simply because his voice is heard, while the ministers are not permitted to see his face—hence the title *zhen*. Moreover, Your Majesty is still young and may not yet fully grasp all affairs. Now, when you sit in court and your decisions on matters of censure and promotion are inappropriate, your shortcomings will be exposed to the ministers. This is not the way to manifest divine insight to the realm." 初, 趙高為郎中令, 所殺及報私怨眾多, 恐大臣入朝奏事毀惡之, 乃說二世曰: 「天子所以貴者, 但以聞聲, 群臣莫得見其面, 故號曰『朕』。且陛下富於春秋, 未必盡通諸事, 今坐朝廷, 譴舉有不當者, 則見短於大臣, 非所以示神明於天下也。」⁴⁹

In this passage, Zhao Gao offers the Second Emperor a semantic gloss on *zhen* 朕, an imperial self-designation used exclusively by emperors in the imperial era. Yet his interpretation was driven purely by self-interest: he sought to prevent any direct interaction between the emperor and his ministers, who were Zhao Gao's potential rivals. In doing so, the pronoun's significance was treated casually and opportunistically. The extant sources do not clarify why the First Emperor adopted *zhen* as an exclusive imperial pronoun. Although certain Han texts define *zhen* as a term denoting humility, such explanations seem anachronistic.⁵⁰ Whatever the First Emperor's reasons may have been, Zhao Gao's gloss—like his calling a deer a horse—was less a genuine philological analysis than a calculated misrepresentation of the correspondence between a word and the reality it designated, and it was certainly not grounded in any authoritative source such as the *Shangshu*.

⁴⁸ This anecdote is also recorded in the *Comments of a Recluse* (*Qian fu lun* 潛夫論); see Wang, *Qian fu lun jian jiao zheng*, 2.58.

⁴⁹ Sima, *Shiji*, 87.2558. Also see 6.266 for a parallel of this anecdote.

⁵⁰ Already in the "Canon of Yao" (Yao dian 堯典) chapter of the *Documents*, it was said that Yao had used the word *zhen* as a first-person pronoun. See *Documents*, 20, p. 178a. However, the main text did not explain the reason for using this word as a pronoun. In the conference held in the White Tiger Pavilion in 79 A.D., a participant defined this word by saying that it expressed humility. See Ban Gu, *Bai hu tong shu zheng* 白虎通疏證, commented and annotated by Chen Li 陳立 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1994), 2.48.

Zhao Gao's arbitrary pairing and manipulation of words and meanings set a dangerous precedent for Han scholars who cared deeply about the relationship between writing/language and the objects they represented. As will be discussed further, Xu Shen himself criticized contemporary scholars for their deliberate misuse of words for personal gain. Zhao Gao's conduct exemplifies the very abuses that Xu Shen deplored. For Xu Shen, as for many Han scholars, the insistence on the correspondence between words and reality (or the objects they denote) likely derived from the Confucian doctrine of the proper use of language, as set forth in the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語).⁵¹

A wide range of Warring States and early imperial texts—both within and beyond the so-called Confucian tradition—likewise stress the centrality of this correspondence for statecraft and the preservation of social order. Expressed in phrases such as *zhengming*,⁵² *zheng qi ming* 正其名 (“to use names correctly”),⁵³ *mingshi* 名實 (“name and reality”),⁵⁴ and *dingming* 定名 (“to fix the name”),⁵⁵ early Chinese thinkers argued that only when a name precisely matches the object it denotes can the essence of that object be accurately represented; conversely, an object can only be given a name when its nature and essence align with “the implications attached to it by that name.”⁵⁶ Extending this principle to the socio-political and ethical realms, it

⁵¹ Herrlee G. Creel argued instead that those references to *zhengming* are later interpolations. See Herrlee G. Creel, *Shen Pu-hai: A Chinese Political Philosopher of the Fourth Century B.C.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 116. In saying “first,” I am assuming that the traditional chronology of early Chinese intellectual history and the traditional dating of available early texts are trustworthy. However, this traditional narrative has been challenged extensively in recent studies. For the *Analects*, E. Bruce Brooks and A. Taeko Brooks have proposed the accretion theory and suggested that the compilation of the *Analects* spanned several centuries. See E. Bruce Brooks and A. Taeko Brooks, trans., *The Original Analects: Sayings of Confucius and His Successors* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). Furthermore, Michael Hunter has argued that it was not until the Western Han that the *Analects* reached its current form. See Michael Hunter, *Confucius Beyond the Analects* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

⁵² The most well-known example should be that in the *Analects* 13:3. Other examples can be seen, besides the “Proper Use of Language” (*Zhengming* 正名) chapter of the *Xunzi*, in Guan Zhong 管仲, *Guanzi xiaozhu* 管子校注, collated and annotated by Li Xiangfeng 黎翔鳳 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2004), 13.771.

⁵³ See, for example, *Xunzi ji jie* 荀子集解, annotated by Wang Xianqian 王先謙 (Beijing: Zhonghua shu ju, 2013), 16.425; Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒, *Chunqiu fanlu yi zheng* 春秋繁露義證, annotated by Su Yu 蘇興 (Beijing: Zhonghua shu ju, 2015), 35.293.

⁵⁴ See *Mencius* 6B: 26; Guan, *Guanzi xiaozhu*, 3.187; Guiguzi 鬼谷子, *Guiguzi ji xiao ji zhu* 鬼谷子集校集注, collated and annotated by Xu Fuhong 許富宏 (Beijing: Zhonghua shu ju, 2010), 12.189.

⁵⁵ See Guan, *Guanzi xiaozhu*, 18.1046.

⁵⁶ Warren Steinkraus, *Socrates, Confucius, and the Rectification of Names* (Philosophy East and West 30.2, 1980), pp. 261-264.

was held that an individual's conduct should faithfully correspond to the duties implied by his or her title.⁵⁷

In this cultural and intellectual milieu, it is difficult to imagine that such a vicious figure as Zhao Gao could have made any positive contribution to the development of the Chinese writing system—particularly when writing and language were regarded as inseparably connected, like two sides of a coin, and when writing was expected to faithfully represent the patterns of the world. A latent question that may have troubled Han scholars such as Liu Xiang, Liu Xin, and Xu Shen was this: how could the Qin seal script accurately convey the essence of reality if one of its inventors, Zhao Gao, had shown no hesitation in distorting reality for his own cunning schemes?

We should be cautious, however, not to overstate Zhao Gao's negative influence on the small seal script in the "sudden creation" model as articulated by Xu Shen. As noted above, no more than 20 percent of the characters in the *Shuowen* appear in forms that differ from those of the ancient script and the large seal script. Yet, given the political significance of writing in Xu Shen's theory, and in light of the stark contrast between Zhao Gao's immorality and Cang Jie's extraordinary vision, the small seal script inevitably suffered by comparison. Nevertheless, the other two creators—Li Si and Huwu Jing—possessed knowledge of ancient traditions and classical texts that underpinned the continuity of the small seal script with earlier forms of writing. In the Han dynasty, when the ancient script was said by Xu Shen to have been eliminated in the Qin bibliocaust, the small seal script became the key through which Han scholars could access the correct meanings and underlying principles of individual characters. This, in turn, explains why Xu Shen chose the small seal script as the basis for the *Shuowen*, even though it was, in his view, a less-than-ideal and ultimately unavoidable choice.

The Clerical Script, Born for Administrative Expediency

If Xu Shen could still accept the small seal script—albeit with far less enthusiasm than for the ancient script—his attitude toward the clerical script was markedly hostile. This is evident from the fact that, in the *Shuowen*, Xu Shen did not employ the clerical script, despite its greater convenience and widespread popularity at the time. Why, then, did Xu Shen refuse to use the clerical script? In what ways did this form of writing differ from the ancient script, which he so highly esteemed and which, according to tradition, had been created by the extraordinary and legendary figure Cang Jie?

This section argues that, for Xu Shen, the clerical script was from its very inception ill-suited to the purpose of moral education. In his view, it originated during the Qin dynasty—notwithstanding the fact, noted by modern scholars such as Chen Zhaorong

⁵⁷ As explicitly demonstrated in *Analects* 12.11, "A ruler should act as a ruler, a minister as a minister, a father as a father, and a son as a son" 君君，臣臣，父父，子子.

陳昭容, that clerical script was already in use before the Qin unification—⁵⁸as a tool to facilitate administrative efficiency and to implement a form of governance aligned with the *Way of the Hegemon* (*badao* 霸道) rather than the *kingly way* (*wangdao* 王道).

Prior to Xu Shen, the “Yiwen zhi” of the *Hanshu* 漢書 notes briefly that the clerical script emerged in the Qin dynasty in response to the ever-increasing volume of documentary work generated by the government’s large number of judicial cases: “At this time the clerical script was first created, arising from the numerous judicial affairs in the government offices; it was intended merely to make writing simpler and easier, and was applied to prisoners and bondservants” 是時始造隸書矣, 起於官獄多事, 苟趨省易, 施之於徒隸也. By abbreviating and simplifying characters, the clerical script was said to enable Qin judicial officials to work more quickly and effectively. The “Yiwen zhi” does not explicitly identify who “created” the clerical script in order to reduce the workload of judicial officials.

By contrast, in Xu Shen’s “Postface,” the clerical script is explicitly attributed to Cheng Miao 程邈, a Qin official from Xiaodu: “The fourth is the assistant script, which is the clerical script of the Qin. It was created by Cheng Miao, a native of Xiaodu and a clerk of the First Emperor of Qin” 四曰佐書, 即秦隸書, 秦始皇帝使下杜人程邈所作也.⁵⁹ Xu Shen gives the same rationale for Cheng Miao’s creation of the script as the “Yiwen zhi”: to facilitate the work of judicial officials. As he states, “At this time, [the Qin government] massively dispatched its officials and troops and expanded

⁵⁸ Chen Zhaorong 陳昭容, *Qin xi wenzi yanjiu: Cong hanzi shi de jiaodu kaocha* 秦系文字研究：從漢字史的角度考察 (Taipei: Zhongyang yanjiuyuan lishi yuyan yanjiu suo, 2003).

⁵⁹ Xu, *Shuowen jiezi*, 15a.3a. My translation of the word *shi* 使 as “official” requires further discussion, since it diverges from earlier renderings of this “Postface,” which take *shi* as “to order.” Nils Göran David Malmqvist translated the sentence *Qin shi huangdi shi Xiadu ren Cheng Miao suo zuo ye* 秦始皇帝使下杜人程邈所作也 as “Created by Cheng Miao of Xiadu on the order of the First Emperor of Qin.” However, Malmqvist misplaced the source, mistakenly attributing the invention of the small seal script to Cheng Miao. Still, his rendering shows that he understood *shi* in the sense of “to order.” See Nils Göran David Malmqvist, “Xu Shen’s Postface to the Shuo Wen Jie Zi,” in David Pankenier, ed., *On Script and Writing in Ancient China* (Stockholm: Stockholms universitet, 1974), p. 51. Following this problematic sequence, O’Neill translates the sentence as “which was made by Cheng Miao, a person from Xiadu, who was ordered to do so by the First Emperor of Qin.” See O’Neill, *Ideography and Chinese Language Theory*, p. 265. My reasons for translating *shi* as “official” are twofold. First, this reading resolves the contradiction between Xu Shen’s “Postface” and Wei Heng’s *Siti shu shi* 四體書勢 (*Four Styles of Chinese Calligraphy*). Wei Heng records that only after Cheng Miao had invented the clerical script did the First Emperor order him to standardize it. In other words, Cheng Miao created the script independently, without imperial command. Second, there is indirect evidence: in early Chinese texts, *shi* 使 and *li* 吏 (“official”) were sometimes interchangeable. See Huang Dekuan 黃德寬, ed., *Gu wenzi puxi shuzheng* 古文字譜系疏證 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2007), vol. 1, p. 251.

corvée labor services. The duties of the judicial officials were so heavy that the clerical script first appeared at this time. [The clerical script] was simplified and could be written with speed” 大發吏卒，興戎役。官獄職務繁，初有隸書，以趣約易。⁶⁰ These sources suggest that, in the Eastern Han, it was generally acknowledged that the clerical script's primary applications lay in legal and administrative contexts. Unfortunately, Xu Shen's account is the only known occurrence of Cheng Miao in Han literature; apart from his identification as an official serving the First Emperor, we have no further information about him.

After the fall of the Han empire, a Western Jin (266–316) source, *Siti shu shi* 四體書勢 (*The Four Styles of Chinese Calligraphy*) by Wei Heng 衛恒 (d. 291), unequivocally identified Cheng Miao, stating that he was a judicial official (*ya yu li* 衙獄吏). Wei Heng further records that Cheng Miao created the clerical script while imprisoned in Yunyang for ten years after offending the First Emperor. According to Wei Heng, Cheng Miao's method was to “augment [strokes] in characters with too few, and reduce [strokes] in characters with too many; to make the square round, and the round square” 少者增益，多者損減，方者使員，員者使方。⁶¹ This process—termed “clericalization” or *li*-variation (*libian* 隸變) by modern scholars—has been shown by Qiu Xigui 裘錫圭(1935-2025) and Cornelia Schindelin to have structurally transformed Chinese writing from a predominantly pictorial system into a more abstract and symbolic one.⁶²

What does Cheng Miao's status as a judicial official contribute to our present discussion? And, more broadly, what qualifications was an official like Cheng Miao expected to possess in the Qin? Han narratives describe Qin officials in sharply negative terms. According to the *Shiji*, the First Emperor approved Li Si's proposal that those wishing to pursue learning should “take officials as their teachers” (*yi li wei shi* 以吏為師).⁶³ Echoing the *Han Feizi* 韓非子 (*Master Han Fei*), in which the eponymous author similarly advised replacing the words of the Former Kings (*xianwang* 先王) with the instruction of officials,⁶⁴ traditional accounts interpret Li Si's proposal as both an obscurantist policy and an affront to the moral heritage of

⁶⁰ Xu, *Shiwen jiezi zhu*, 15a.10b.

⁶¹ For Wei Heng's *Siti shu shi*, see Fang, *Jinshu*, 36.1063.

⁶² See Qiu Xigui 裘錫圭, *Wenzi xue gaiyao* 文字學概要 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1988), pp. 82–85; Cornelia Schindelin: “The Li-Variation 隸變 (*libian*): When the Ancient Chinese Writing changed to Modern Chinese Script,” in Yannis Haralambous ed., *Graphemics in the 21st century. Brest, June 13–15, 2018. Proceedings* (Brest: Fluxus Editions, 2019), pp. 227–243.

⁶³ Sima, *Shiji*, 6.255; 87.2546. Xu Guang 徐廣 (352–425) added in his commentary on this phrase that in another edition, the compound “statutes and ordinances” (*faling* 法令) did not appear in the “Annals of the First Emperor of Qin.”

⁶⁴ Han Fei 韓非, *Han Feizi ji jie* 韓非子集解, annotated by Wang Xianshen 王先慎 (Beijing: Zhonghua shu ju, 2003), 19.452.

antiquity. They also portray Qin officials as akin to the “harsh officials” (*kuli* 酷吏) described by Sima Qian and Ban Gu 班固 (32–92), who were said to wield laws and punishments with excessive severity.⁶⁵ In this conventional narrative, what officials taught was limited to statutes and ordinances, which the common people were compelled to obey, while the moral lessons of the ancient sages were excluded entirely from the curriculum. As a result, ordinary people could no longer use the words of antiquity to criticize contemporary affairs.

Within this framework, it would come as no surprise that Cheng Miao, as a Qin official, lacked the foundational knowledge of the ancient teachings that Han officials were expected to possess. However, recent discoveries of Qin bamboo-slip manuscripts have challenged this long-standing narrative and offered new insights into the actual qualities of Qin officials. Texts such as *Weili zhi dao* 為吏之道 (*The Way of Being an Official*) from Shuihudi 睡虎地 and *Weili zhiguan ji qianshou* 為吏治官及黔首 (*The Way of Governing the Officials and the Common People*), now preserved at Yuelu 嶽麓 Academy, suggest a more nuanced picture.⁶⁶ Taking the former manuscript as an example, Hsing I-tien 邢義田 argues that, although it served a pedagogical function in teaching prospective officials to read and write, its primary purpose was to provide essential moral training and to encourage self-cultivation.⁶⁷ Ho Kim Kyung 金慶浩 goes further, contending that both manuscripts promote ideas akin to those found in the later “Confucian” curriculum, and even refers to Qin officials as *shi* 士, a title reserved for intellectuals in the Chinese imperium.⁶⁸ Without the evidence of these Qin manuscripts, we might still be wholly guided by the Han-derived tradition.

⁶⁵ In contrast to the harsh officials were the reasonable officials (*xunli* 循吏), since the reign of Emperor Xuan of Han (r. 74–48 B.C.E.), who bore the responsibility of teachers (*shi* 師) to promote moral education. It should also be noted that, although they were criticized for their abuses of laws and punishments, the harsh officials by the time of Zhang Tang 張湯 (155 B.C.–115 B.C.) did receive positive comments from historians at the ends of their biographies. See Sima, *Shiji*, 122.3154; Ban, *Hanshu*, 90.3676.

⁶⁶ For the transcription of the entire text of *The Way of Being an Official*, see Shuihudi Qin mu zhujian zhengli xiaozu 睡虎地秦墓竹簡整理小組, ed., *Shuihudi Qin mu zhujian* 睡虎地秦墓竹簡 (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2001), pp. 165–176. For the transcription of the entire text of *The Way of Governing the Officials and the Common People*, see Zhu Hanmin 朱漢民 and Chen Songzhang 陳松長, eds., *Yuelu shuyuan cang qinjian* 嶽麓書院藏秦簡 (Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 2010), vol. 1, pp. 187–191.

⁶⁷ Hsing I-tien 邢義田, “Han jiceng yuanli de jingshen suyang yu jiaoyu: Cong Juyan du 506.7 (*Li pian*) shuo qi” 漢基層員吏的精神素養與教育——從居延牘 506.7 (《吏》篇) 說起, *Guwenzi yu gudai shi* 古文字與古代史 3 (2012): 416–417.

⁶⁸ Kim Ho Kyung 金慶浩, “Qin, Han chu ‘shi’ yu ‘li’ de xingzhi: Yi *Wei li zhi dao* he *Wei li zhiguan ji qianshou wei zhongxin*” 秦、漢初「士」與「吏」的性質——以《為吏之道》和《為吏治官及黔首》為中心, *Jian bo* 簡帛 8 (2013): 309–331.

A central element in Han portrayals of Qin officials—particularly their moral character—was shaped less by historical accuracy than by political utility. By emphasizing the Qin's alleged cultural destructiveness, epitomized in the charges of book burning and the suppression of learning, Han writers were able to displace responsibility for their own bureaucratic corruption onto the previous dynasty. As Elisa Levi Sabattini has argued, Jia Yi's 賈誼 (200–168 B.C.) *Guo Qin lun* 過秦論 (On Surpassing the Qin) exemplifies how the negative image of Qin was largely constructed in the Han to meet contemporary political needs.⁶⁹ Yet considerable evidence indicates that the early Western Han inherited many of the institutional and legal frameworks of Qin. The insistence on denying Qin–Han continuity, and attributing systemic problems to the Qin, therefore served less as sober historical assessment than as rhetorical strategy. This political logic helps explain why Qin's infamy was not only exaggerated but at times distorted, leaving a historiographical legacy that complicates our understanding of its actual historical conditions.

In his *Postface* to the *Shuowen*, Xu Shen delivers a sharp critique of the intellectual climate among officials and scholars of his time. After mentioning the discovery of pre-Qin texts and bronze inscriptions in the Han, such as the so-called Kongbi manuscripts of the Classics, he laments:

The world at large mocks and censures, regarding these as the pursuits of the eccentric. Thus they distort the correct text, fabricating unknowable writings from walls, disturbing established practice in order to dazzle the age. Students compete in expounding graphs and explicating the Classics, claiming that the Qin's clerical script was the script of Cang Jie, and saying: 'How could what is transmitted from father to son be altered!' Thus they absurdly declare: 'The head of a horse means long; a man holding ten signifies a peck; *chong* 虫 means 'bent inside.' The Censor interprets the statutes, to the point of deciding cases by graphic form: 'If one accepts money for harassment, the graph *ke* 苛 ends with a stop mark.' Such instances are numerous. All diverge from the Kong family's archaic script and err from the *Shizhou*. Vulgar scholars and petty men cling to their accustomed practices, blinded to what they have not heard. 而世人大共非訾, 以為好奇者也, 故詭更正文, 鄉壁虛造不可知之書, 變亂常行, 以耀於世. 諸生競逐說字, 解經誼, 稱秦之隸書為倉頡時書, 云: 「父子相傳, 何得改易!」乃猥曰: 「馬頭人為長, 人持十為斗, 虫者, 屈中也。」廷尉說律, 至以字斷法: 「苛人受錢, 苛之字止句也。」若此者甚眾, 皆不合孔氏古文, 謬於《史籀》. 俗儒鄙夫, 翫其所習, 蔽所希聞.

⁶⁹ For a comprehensive analysis of Jia Yi's essay, see Sabattini, "How to Surpass the Qin: On Jia Yi's Intentions in the *Guo Qin lun*."

The kinds of examples Xu Shen cites resemble the notorious case of Zhao Gao, who manipulated written characters in order to distort meaning. Both reflect the misuse of graphs through arbitrary or self-serving explanation, producing what Xu Shen elsewhere decries as *buzheng* 不正 (incorrectness). This phenomenon stemmed partly from officials' ignorance of pre-clerical and pre-small seal forms after the book burning, and partly from their deliberate manipulation of writing for personal advantage. As Xu Shen concluded: "People used what suited their own interest; right and wrong lost all fixity; cunning rhetoric and perverse words left scholars everywhere in doubt" 人用己私, 是非無正, 巧說邪辭, 使天下學者疑.⁷⁰ Prior to Xu Shen, the *Huainanzi* had already expressed a similar concern, lamenting that writing had been exploited by villainous individuals to fabricate pseudo-documents, acquitting criminals while condemning the innocent.⁷¹ This indicates that such "incorrectness" had a long history well before Xu Shen's time.

Following Xu Shen's line of reasoning, the pervasive moral corruption among Han officials can be traced in no small part to the widespread adoption of the clerical script invented by Cheng Miao, a man who prioritized administrative expediency at the expense of moral cultivation. For Cheng Miao and, by extension, the entire Qin imperial government, politics amounted to little more than the technical problem of securing the emperor's control over the empire. Xu Shen, by contrast, regarded politics as inseparable from the task of moral education. As he concluded, "Written characters are the foundation of the Classics and the beginning of royal governance" 蓋文字者, 經藝之本, 王政之始.⁷² Unlike the way of hegemon based on sheer force, Xu Shen deliberately invoked the term *wang* 王—rich with moral implications—to articulate his conception of legitimate governance. As Xu Shen glossed in the *Shuowen*, the word *wang* 王 signifies "that to which all under Heaven turns" 天下所歸往也. In the passages he cited from Dong Zhongshu, the vertical stroke running through the character *wang* was interpreted as representing the king's unique capacity to mediate between Heaven, Earth, and humanity.⁷³ The precondition for such mediation, however, does not lie in the exercise of brute force, but in attracting allegiance through the practice of benevolence. To him, true political order was grounded in the principles of benevolence and righteousness advocated by Confucius and Mencius: a rule that not only maintained stability but also ensured that the people could be properly formed through a curriculum of moral instruction. Crucially, Xu Shen emphasized that the successful realization of this moral education was inseparable from the proper use of

⁷⁰ Xu, *Shuowen jiezi*, 15a.4a.

⁷¹ Liu, *Huainan honglie jijie*, 20.673.

⁷² Xu, *Shuowen jiezi*, 15a.21b.

⁷³ Xu, *Shuowen jiezi*, 1a.18a.

written characters. Without writing, neither moral education nor kingly governance could be effectively carried out

Given the centrality of writing, Xu Shen, in his "Postface" to the *Shuowen jiezi*, sought to ascribe the problems of the Han empire to the widespread adoption of clerical script—a creation of the "notorious" Qin, who, in his view, had sought to consolidate their hegemonic rule through an obscurantist policy that appointed officials versed only in laws and ordinances as the instructors of the common people. Unlike the mythical inventor Cang Jie, Cheng Miao was merely a mortal official, portrayed in Han sources—often with marked prejudice—as one who dismissed the teachings of the ancient sages and revered only the exclusive and rigid application of laws and ordinances. Consequently, Cheng Miao could never be credited with devising a script capable of truthfully disclosing the hidden principles of the cosmos or of transmitting the sages' arcane messages, thereby contributing to the moral curriculum that underpinned true "kingly governance."

By contrast, the clerical script was designed solely to simplify and accelerate the cumbersome procedures of administration, ultimately serving to strengthen the emperors' control over their subjects. Put differently, an official trained only in clerical script could process administrative and legal documents but remained unable to read the Classics, which were originally written in the ancient script—the perfect form of writing in Xu Shen's philosophy, uniquely suited to moral instruction. The very purpose of Cheng Miao's clerical script, therefore, was to cultivate a professional corps of scribes adept in bureaucratic writing. This intention is reflected in Han sources through expressions such as *qiao shishu* 巧史書 ("artful scribes"), *neng shi* 能史 ("competent scribes"), and *shan shishu* 善史書 ("skilled scribes").⁷⁴ As Itaru Tomiya 冨谷至 and Hsing I-tien have shown, such terms—initially pejorative in the Western Han—came to denote officials who could competently read and write administrative documents in clerical script and thereby discharge their bureaucratic duties with efficiency and without difficulty.⁷⁵ By channeling his bias against the Qin into his broader philosophy of writing, Xu Shen ascribed the prevailing errors and moral corruption among Han officials to the invention and use of clerical script. He regarded this degeneration as a direct sequel to the Qin's obscurantist policy of appointing officials who knew only laws and ordinances to serve as the teachers of the common people.

⁷⁴ For *qiao shishu*, see Ban, *Hanshu*, 72.3077. For *neng shi*, see Ban, *Hanshu*, 76.3226; 96B.3907. For *shan shishu*, see Ban, *Hanshu*, 9.258; 58.2628; 76.3233; 90.3669; 97B.2974.

⁷⁵ Tomiya, *Bunsho gyōsei no Kan Teikoku: Mokkan, chikukan no jidai*, pp. 112-116; Hsing I-tien 邢義田, *Han dai Cang jie, Jijiu, ba ti he 'shi shu' wenti: Zai lun Qin Han guanli ruhe xuexi wenzi* 漢代《蒼頡》、《急就》、八體和「史書」問題—再論秦漢官吏如何學習文字, *Guwenzi yu gudai shi* 古文字與古代史 2 (2009): 437. An immediate example comes from the biography of both Gongs, where the skill of writing administrative documents (*qiao shishu* 巧史書) acquired by counties' and kingdoms' officials was said to cheat one's superior.

Conclusion

In his *Postface* to the *Shuowen jiezi*, Xu Shen recounted the development of writing not simply as a technical matter of graphic reform, but as a moral history of civilization. At each stage of his narrative, the figure of the “inventor” was less important for what he contributed philologically than for what he represented morally: Cang Jie’s superhuman vision embodied the possibility of a script that disclosed cosmic principles; Shi Zhou’s scribal authority reflected the ritual order of the Zhou; Li Si and Huwu Jing stood ambiguously between preservation and compromise; Zhao Gao exemplified the destructive misuse of language; and Cheng Miao epitomized the functional, yet spiritually impoverished, bureaucrat. Read together, these figures reveal a trajectory in which script creation shifted from the extraordinary to the ordinary, from moral cultivation to technical expediency, and from kingly governance to hegemonic control.

This interpretive arc sheds light on why Xu Shen valorized the ancient script while dismissing the clerical script. For him, the latter was more than an aesthetic or calligraphic break—it was a symbol of the Qin’s obscurantist policy that elevated law and coercion over virtue and instruction. By linking the Han’s prevailing corruption and “incorrectness” to the clerical script, Xu Shen effectively transformed a philological judgment into a political critique. His refusal to use clerical script in the *Shuowen* was thus a deliberate act of resistance: a decision to anchor his lexicon in small seal script so that scholars could retrace their way back to the moral clarity of antiquity.

In this sense, the *Shuowen* was both a technical handbook and a moral treatise. It sought to stabilize language by re-establishing its correspondence with reality, and in so doing to stabilize the realm itself. Xu Shen’s assertion that “written characters are the foundation of the Classics and the beginning of royal governance” placed philology at the very heart of political order. Just as the vertical stroke in the graph *wang* 王 symbolized the king’s mediation between Heaven, Earth, and humanity, writing—when used correctly—mediated between past and present, sages and rulers, principles and practice. By embedding the Confucian dialectic of benevolence and righteousness into the history of script, Xu Shen elevated the study of characters from an antiquarian pursuit into a moral enterprise aimed at reforming his age.

Ultimately, Xu Shen’s vision was less about recovering the exact shapes of ancient graphs than about recovering the ethical orientation that those graphs symbolized. His retrospective method—“recording the small seal script of the present, in combination with the ancient and large seal scripts”—was not antiquarian nostalgia but a program for cultural renewal. By working backward through layers of script, he hoped to restore the original function of writing as moral instruction, and thereby to realign his contemporaries with the way of the king. The *Shuowen jiezi*, in this light, stands as both the first dictionary of Chinese and a political manifesto: a philological intervention into the moral crises of the Eastern Han.

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