SHUN舜 AND THE INTERPRETATION OF EARLY ORTHOGRAPHICAL VARIATION

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Abstract

Ji Xusheng’s季旭昇 account of the character〈舜〉as a derivative of〈尧〉and ultimately of〈允〉by reference to Warring States excavated manuscript evidence, recently elaborated by Adam Smith in these pages, appears to clear up the mystery of Shun’s舜 doppelgänger—Jun俊—in the Shanhai jing山海經. However, while Ji’s observations are of value, there is danger in treating early orthographical variation of this kind with one eye on an interpretive problem from the received texts. In this case, attested variation shows clearly that the form〈舜〉was no such derivative, its peculiar origins arguably “large and useless” from a textual critical point view.

The name of the sage ruler Shun舜 is found written in two different ways in the Chu楚 bamboo manuscripts unearthed in Guodian郭店, Jingmen, Hubei in 1993 and dated to around 300 B.C.E. Here, following Ji Xusheng季旭昇 and Adam Smith, I label these two forms A(employed in “Qiong da yi shi”窮達以時) and B (in “Tang Yu zhi dao”唐虞之道).1

![Character A](image1)

![Character B](image2)


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Concurring with Ji, Smith argues that “Guodian form A is the more conservative writing for Shun, preserving one crucially informative component intact: the toptmost element is 允 [= Guodian 真, etc.], a phonetic spelling for the name Shun.” The suggestion is attractive, in part because certain narrative elements (as well as sound) unite illustrious Shun 舜 with the more marginal deity (Di) Jun (帝) 隼, prominent within the received Shanhai jing 山海經. If 舜 were simply a formal derivative of 允 (Ji’s terms include fenhuazi 分化字 and bianzi 變體), the orthographical dots would be neatly connected as well. The facts are not so straightforward, however. I show below that the Guodian speller 允 is an innovation, that form B is (relatively speaking) conservative, and more generally that when it comes to questions of “original form,” our attention must remain on the entire range of orthographical variation, not on particular variants’ relative pertinence to philological problems or relative susceptibility to analysis in terms of phonetic components. An adjusted approach leads us closer to the true ancestry of 舜, though whether it is of any interest depends on one’s degree of comfort with the fact that in the study of early language and script, the logic of interpretation of variation can yield implications for a time to which no text bears witness.

The unifying and thus most significant feature of the character 舜 in its earliest available attestations is a graphic element at times identical to contemporaneous 炎 (see Figure 1, C [for which to follow I use regularized 真], D and F), at times somewhat more distantly resembling it (see E, G and H). This shared feature must reflect an attribute of a common ancestor, not a late innovation as Ji’s approach requires. The “proto-feature” need not have looked exactly like 炎 in formal terms, and in analytical terms need not have constituted a redeployment of

3. The glyph 舜 usually writes Middle Chinese (MC) jün > yan² ‘flame; burn’ (MC throughout is after William H. Baxter, A Handbook of Old Chinese Phonology [Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1992]). In C–H, Guwen 古文 “Ancient Script” is a Han-era designation (and misnomer) for then-obsolete glyphs of innovating Warring States traditions; see Smith, “Early Chinese Manuscript Writings,” 77–80. The six forms of 舜 shown are (C) Lesser Seal (xiaozhuan 小篆) and (D) Guwen renderings from the Shuowen jiezi 說文解字 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1998) as they are shown at Smith, “Early Chinese Manuscript Writings,” 70; (E) the Shuowen Guwen headword Shun 舜 from the Kangxi zidian 康熙字典 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1980), 1008; (F) a Hanjian 汗簡 Guwen form from Huang Xiquan 黃錫全, Hanjian zhushi 汗簡注釋 (Taipei: Taiwan guji, 2005), 181, to which compare Smith, “Early Chinese Manuscript Writings,” 70; (G) a Guwen form of 蕀 also from Hanjian zhushi, 23; and (H) one of numerous Han-era personal Seal forms from Luo Fuyi’s 羅福頤 (1905–81) Hanyin wenzi zheng 漢印文字徵 as presented at Gu wenzi gulin 古文字詁林 (Shanghai: Shanghai jiaoyu, 1999–2004), vol. 5, 690.
the ancestor of 〈炎〉, but its erstwhile existence is beyond doubt. Also significant is the fuller structural isomorphy observable across C through H and similar forms of 〈舜〉 including B above. This mapping implicates three components which I label ①, ②, and ③ in Figure 2. The same structure is reflected in, among others, regularized (so-called) Guwen 古文 forms presented at the Kangxi Dictionary entry Shun 舜 (see n.3 above): 〈䖧〉, 〈巛〉 and 〈䥯〉, the last instructive in featuring 〈夊〉, “foot,” at ③.

This range is in itself problematic for the idea that A—represented in the excavated Chu slips in particular—preserves a phonetic speller lost elsewhere. More importantly, it is necessary to disagree with Smith that Guwen-type forms (including B) are “essentially unrecognizable as relatives” of the Seal form C and similar:5 Rather, all variants of early 〈舜〉 adhere to the same structural template, with delimited alternation at positions ① and ③ and basic agreement at ② 〈炎〉, a regularity which any successful account of the origins of the character will need to address. That the element 〈允〉 of Guodian A is arguably an

acceptable speller for the name Shun, while the motivation for 〈炎〉 (and other early constituents) remains mysterious, is immaterial to this methodological point.

This picture is entirely in keeping with Smith’s description of the orthography of the Warring States manuscripts as developing largely outside of traditional prescriptions and thus undergoing a “rapid graphic evolution and innovative departure from the earlier script of the Zhou court.” On the level of the individual glyph, such evolution is frequently visible as formal simplification and (often simultaneously) as reanalysis of marginal or obscure features in terms of components which, from a synchronic view, are more productive and/or phonologically instructive, a process Smith terms “attraction.” What Ji Xusheng has really detected in forms A and B above, then, is a case of such reanalysis in which an already-reduced but fairly direct relative of early 〈䑞〉 (i.e., B) was adjusted to a form whose upper portions resembled 〈炎〉 (i.e., A). Ji’s notion of formal change in the opposite direction—from 〈允〉 and then A towards B–H and thus from simple to complex, from productive to idiosyncratic as regards individual components, and from instructive to opaque as regards sound—must be ruled out from principle. Warring States 〈允〉-based writings of the name Shun do appear to have filtered into our received texts, and possible knock-on effects do merit investigation. However, such writings are precisely a function of Warring States-era regional innovation, not windows on earlier form (and note that the innovation is reflected in just the texts one might suspect on independent grounds of being partial heirs to “Chu” traditions.)

In light of the nature of the early adjustment that produced A, it will not be surprising that the more recent history of analysis of the form 〈䑞〉 has in large part been a fruitless search for a plausible phonetic component. Here, Ding Shan 丁山 caught sight of the obvious: the closest formal relative and true core constituent of 〈舜〉 at early periods was 〈舜〉. Seal Script renderings of these two characters take the (regularized) forms 〈舜〉 and 〈舜〉 respectively, sharing 〈舜〉 and differing only by inclusion in the former of the “classifier” 〈二〉. Early texts seem not to use 〈舜〉 independently and thus provide no direct indications regarding the word(s) it might first have written. In purely phonological terms,

7. Ding Shan, Zhongguo gudai zongjiao yu shenhua kao 中國古代宗教與神話考 (Shanghai: Longmen lianhe, 1961), 84. Referring to the two Seal forms, the author notes that they are “similar as regards both pronunciation and form and in ancient times were perhaps at first the same character” 音形俱相似，在古代可能本是一字.
however, this was likely an MC lin. The standard (i.e., Shuowen) suggestion is that the word at issue was MC lin 磺～熒, naming the marshland or graveyard gui huo 鬼火 “ghost lights” now attributed to spontaneous ignition of byproducts of organic decay (‘ignis fatuus, will-o’-the-wisp’): this direction would account for the inclusion of the component 〈炎〉 in early 〈舜〉 by reference not to sound, in which respect the two are irreconcilable, but to meaning.

Certain implications of this connection are straightforward. Given phonological shape—MC lin (＞lin²) vs. sywinH (＞Shun⁴)—and an otherwise unexplained near-total sharing of written form, we are obligated to treat the two characters involved as true xiesheng 諧聲 relatives, and to resolve the disparity between the MC onsets l- and sy- at the Old Chinese stage. I refrain from making a specific proposal here, but xiesheng contact of this kind has parallels: MC lijangX 两 ‘pair’ vs. syang 商 “come between, split, etc.” (partly congruent written forms which write cognates involving transitive devoicing), lak 樂 ‘joy’ vs. syak 鐘～爍 ‘melt’, and lu 處 ‘crucible’ vs. xu 虎～xuX 虎 ‘tiger’ (MC x- rather than sy- in ‘tiger’ being a function of vowel quality.) Baxter and Sagart account for such orthographical contact where they recognize it (‘joy’ vs. ‘melt’; ‘crucible’ vs. ‘tiger’) by reconstructing *r- vs. voiceless *r- (＞MC x- ～sy-).⁸ The same contrast must likewise be most of the answer to the OC forms of ‘ghost light’ vs. ‘Shun’.⁹

The early relationship between lin and Shun might of course have been strictly phonological, and not in addition etymological. Nonetheless, in conclusion, we ought to think more deeply about the glyph 〈舜〉, core of early 〈舜〉, and the word it was first designed to represent. Happily, the character appears in Western Zhou bronze inscriptions some five centuries older than the Guodian manuscripts.¹⁰

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⁹. The rest of the answer is the Old Chinese source of MC -w- in ‘Shun’: here I am happy to accept Schuessler’s final *-wins for OC proper (see *Minimal Old Chinese and Later Han Chinese: A Companion to Grammata Serica Recensa* [Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2009], 321), though indications for a complex onset at an early stage (see below) mean there are other possibilities.
¹⁰. There is no consensus regarding interpretation of the relevant portion of the inscription in question, found on two Middle Western Zhou bronze steamers termed Yin ji li 尹姞鬲 (Jicheng 754), or regarding the small number of directly derivative Bronze Inscriptional characters. Ahead of further study, I would neither advocate nor rule out the possibility that the puzzling phrase here (regularized as sheng lin ming 聖明) refers to “the sagacity of the sage Shun 舜.” For discussion of the inscription, see for instance Xie Naihe 謝乃和, “Jinwen zhong suo jian Xi-Zhou wanghou shiji kao” 金文中所見西周王后事蹟考, *Huaxia kaogu* 華夏考古 2008.3, 142–52.
By reference to early orthographic conventions, the core of this form has been rightly recognized as a human or human-like figure of which the “feet” are a part. The source of later 〈炎〉 is also perfectly clear, though the notion that 〈炎〉 per se (“fire” + “fire”) was an original constituent of 〈犇〉 (or of 〈舜〉) must be, and has been, dismissed.11 As far as the word so written, the Shuowen suggestion that 〈犇〉 first wrote MC lin ‘will-o’-the-wisp’, while a possibility, must be reassessed, not simply accommodated via adjusted paleographical explanations (e.g., that J and K show a person pursued by “ghost lights”; see the remarks of Du Zhonggao referenced just above). The proper methodological course as regards the unaccounted-for marks along the “limbs” of J and K is to continue to seek parallel depictive conventions in the early script. Such investigation suggests that the original illustrative intent here was elements covering the skin: in L below are inked tattoos on face and flesh in 〈黒〉 as it first appears in Zhou-era Bronze Inscriptions (MC xok 黒 ‘black’ probably first meant ‘mark with ink’, causative of MC mok 墨 ‘ink’);¹² in M we see, according to Xu Zhongshu 徐中舒 and others, plates of armor upon a figure in profile as found in Shang Oracle Bones Inscriptions 〈介〉, writing MC keajH ‘plates (of armor), scales’.¹³

11. Best on these points is Du Zhonggao 杜忠誥, “Gu wenzi xingti yanjiu wu ze” 古文字形體研究五則; I have reference to the remarks on lin 羲 therein that are reprinted at Gu wenzi gulin, vol. 8, 735–37.
And so the intersection of cautious phonology and paleography marks out a straightforward answer for the word first written by Western Zhou J and K, direct ancestors of 〈粦〉 and in turn of 〈舜〉: not ‘will-o’-the-wisp’, but MC lin (< OC *rin) 鱗 ‘scales [of fish or other animal]; scaled’. For what it is worth, a likely etymologically equivalent choice—and given present evidence the best choice for the creature actually illustrated by (the ancestors of) J and K—is early Chinese *rin > MC lin ‘pangolin (Manis pentadactyla)’: the word appears in both Hakka and Min and in similar forms in Tai languages, and is found written with the glyph 〈鱣〉 (among others) in texts new and old including the *Shanhai jing*:

又東南三十里，曰依軲之山 … 有獸焉，其狀如犬，虎爪有甲，其名曰鱣，善駚𤘝，食者不風。

Another thirty li to the southeast is a mountain called Eika … there is a creature there, its form like a dog, with the claws of a tiger and armored plates: its name is rin; it is capable of standing upright [on its hind legs]. One who consumes [its flesh] will avoid rheumatism.

I stop short at the matter of whether at one point Shun and the scaly pangolin might have had more in common than just pronunciation and written form, a matter implicating the further matters of a half-brother Xiang 象 ‘elephant’, of the role of a meritorious and indeed para-human pangolin in animist belief systems, of the relationship

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15. Lai Wenying 賴文英, *Xinwu xiang Lüwu Fengshun qiang Kehua yanjiu* 新屋鄉呂屋豐順腔客話研究, Master’s Thesis, National Kaohsiung Normal University, 2004, presents on p. 137 Thai lin4, Dong 僾 (= Kam) lan6, Bunong 布儂 (Northern Tai) lin6, Daide 傣德 (Southwestern Tai) ke6lin5, Zhangzhou 漳州 (Southern Min) la6li3, Meixian 梅縣 (Hakka) le5li3, and Xinwu Fengshun 新屋豐順 (Hakka) lien2li1, among others. Also compare the southern contributions to the national language lingli 鯪狸 and lianli 鰱鯉, both ‘pangolin’.

16. *Shanhai jing*, “Zhongshan jing” 中山經 (*Sibu congkan chubian 四部叢刊初編* ed. vol. 466), 26b–27a; see also Ding, *Zhongguo gudai zongjiao yu shenhua kao*, 84. This is part of the core *Shan jing* 山經 “Classic of Mountains” portion of the text, dating perhaps to the Warring States period and by no means exclusively fantastical material (the description here is spot-on, arguably excepting the claimed therapeutic effects of consumption). Guo Pu’s 郭璞 (276–324 C.E.) commentary says of the name lin 豫 that it “means its body has scales [linjia 鱗甲]; the pronunciation is (MC) linH吝”：言体有鱗甲，音吝; the contrast with the typical MC level tone reading is of interest.
between *lin* 鱗 ~ 鱗 (also *gorin > qilin 麒麟 ~ 麒麟?) and trisyllabic names for the pangolin in, e.g., Malay (whence English) as it relates to the Austronesian/Kra–Dai presence in early southern China, of an epithet *kwrán 鱩 ~ *kwrîn 鯤 ‘old unmarried man’, and so forth. The evidence above renders all of these entirely legitimate directions of inquiry, ones which it would be incurious to scoff at given merely the great chronological distance separating the time period to which such possibilities relate from that of the written record upon which most Sinologists naturally focus, or given merely the arguable irrelevance of the whole question to professional readers of texts.

17. For OC forms of ‘old unmarried man’, see Schuessler, *Minimal Old Chinese*, 334. The idea of an Austronesian–Chinese connection here is not new; see Lai, *Xinwu xiang Lüwu Fengshun qiang Kehua yanjiu*, 137, and also Samuel Wells Williams, *Syllabic Dictionary of the Chinese Language* (Shanghai: American Presbyterian Mission Press, 1896), 541, where *lin* 鱩 is defined as “a name for the scaly manis or pangolin, and perhaps this character imitates the last syllable of its Javanese name pangiling.”