



ART FRONTIER

An International Art Journal / Vol.3 No.1 Jan.-Mar. 2025

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To cite this article: Liu Zhengcheng, "Insights into the Native Characteristics of Chinese Civilization from the Origins of Writing," *Art Frontier* 3,no.1 (March 2025):-,https://doi.org/10.64212/0WSV2687.

DOI: 10.64212/0WSV2687

ISSN: 2835-5490

EISSN: 2836-841X

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This article has undergone double-blind peer review.

Website: www.artfrontier.org

Email: artfrontier2023@outlook.com

Publishing Frequency: Quarterly (March, June, September, December)



Insights into the Native Characteristics of Chinese Civilization from the Origins of Writing

Liu Zhengcheng

Abstract

The Yan-Huang culture, as the dual pillar system of the same origin of Chinese civilization, holds profound significance. Through an in-depth exploration of the rich modern archaeological data, particularly the inscribed symbols, it becomes evident that the Jianghai civilization of the Yangtze River basin, led by the Yan Emperor, and the inland civilization of the Yellow River basin, centered around the Yellow Emperor, as recorded in the *Records of the Grand Historian*, are two subsystems that converged to form the mature Chinese script of the Shang Dynasty oracle bone inscriptions. Among these, the Yangshao script symbols belong to the inland system, while the Sanxingdui and Dongyi script symbols are closely associated with the Jianghai system. These systems are interconnected by blood ties and have undergone a long process of integration and development, showcasing the profound origins, intricate fusion, and remarkable native characteristics of the mature ideographic Chinese script. This native characteristic stands in stark contrast to the phonetic-based ancient writing systems of West Asia and North Africa.

Key Words: Native characteristics , Yanhuang origins of Characters, ancient scripts

1. The Yan-Huang Civilization and the Distinction Between Yi and Xia

1.1 Two Theories on Human and Civilizational Origins

During its germination and early growth stages, was Chinese civilization an independent and flourishing tree rooted in the fertile soil of its native land, or was it a hybrid plant, grafted with foreign branches under the gentle breeze of Middle Eastern civilization, evolving through fusion and development as suggested by L. S. Stavrianos?¹ However, the greatness of Chinese civilization lies in the fact that East Asian native culture is like a profound cultural treasure trove, possessing a unique charm and allure, with many distinctive characteristics. It is precisely these native traits,

acting as a powerful adhesive, that have embraced and intermingled with foreign cultural elements. Over time, they have sculpted a great, unique, and unparalleled continuous civilization that stands proudly in the world. From its origins in the Shang Dynasty, Chinese civilization has flowed unceasingly to the present day, becoming a shining gem in the history of human civilization. The author further elaborates that Shang Dynasty civilization resembles a vibrant cultural mosaic, pieced together from numerous unique “cultural fragments”, such as barley, wheat, sheep, cattle, horses, bronze, and wheels.² When we embark on a journey of exploration, tracing these elements back to their Neolithic origins, we are astonished to find that most of them first emerged in the ancient lands of the Middle East.

1.2 Yi in the East and Xia in the West: Revisiting Ancient Chinese Civilization

Since the 1990s, the renowned Chinese archaeologist, paleographer, and editor-in-chief of *The Complete Collection of Chinese Calligraphy - Oracle Bone Inscriptions Volume*, Academician Feng Shi of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, has repeatedly called for a re-examination and deeper understanding of Chinese civilization from the unique perspective of the origins of writing!

Academician Feng Shi has keenly observed that, for a long time, the “Great Unification” ideology of the Spring and Autumn period has acted like a heavy filter, profoundly shaping people’s understanding of ancient Chinese civilization. This has led to the subconscious assumption that writing and culture during that time were unified. From a geographical perspective, the Taihang Mountains act like a natural giant axe, splitting the land into eastern and western halves. To the east lies the cultural region of Yi, while to the west lies the cultural region of Xia. This division is not arbitrary but is supported by solid archaeological and cultural evidence. Academician Feng Shi believes that changes in the “center of the earth” hold clues to the shifting dynamics between Yi and Xia.³ Fu Sinian, through textual research, divided ancient civilization into “Yi in the East and Xia in the West,” with the Taihang Mountains serving as the geographical marker. According to Fu Sinian, the area east of the Taihang Mountains belonged to the Yi cultural region, while the area west of it belonged to the Xia cultural region.⁴

Carefully preserved within a jade turtle, the plaque features four layers of images, with a striking octagonal pattern pointing in four directions at its center. Academician Feng Shi identifies this object as the so-called “Turtle Script” or “Luoshu” frequently mentioned in ancient Han texts.⁵ Through extensive collection and study of similar octagonal patterns from the Neolithic period, he discovered that the archaeological materials bearing these patterns were all unearthed east of the Taihang Mountains, stretching from the lower reaches of the Liao River in the north to the lower reaches of the Yellow River and the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River in the south. To date, not a single such artifact has been found west of the Taihang Mountains. Even more fascinating is that this unique imagery remains vividly alive in the folk customs of southwestern ethnic minorities such as the Yi ethnic group, Miao ethnic group, and Lisu ethnic group. Some of these images are ingeniously integrated with the Bagua (Eight Trigrams), and in the Yi language, the Bagua is aptly referred to as the “Eight Corners” (figure 1).

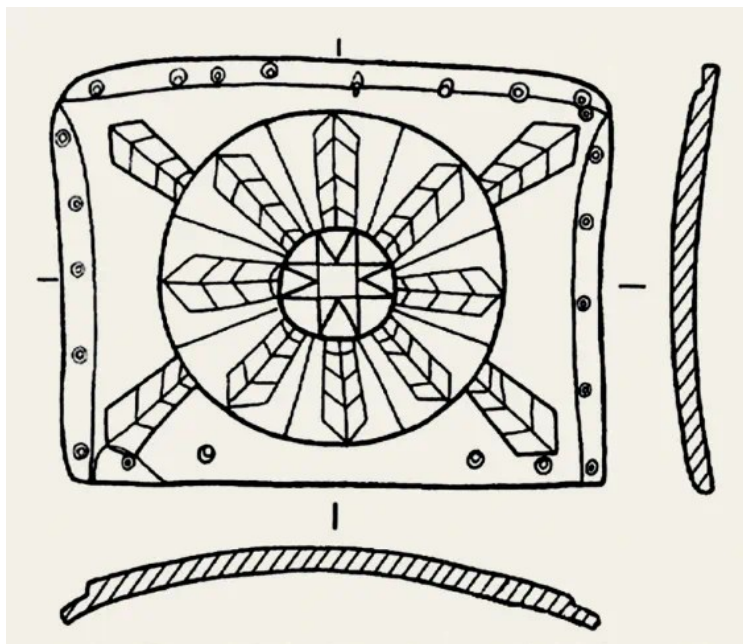


Figure 1. “Bagua”Figure (Eight Trigrams).

Academician Feng Shi believes that these distinctive cultures served as the cradle for the Yi script, which developed independently of the Xia writing system, providing fertile ground for the birth and evolution of the Yi script.⁶ Among the prehistoric cultural remains in these eastern regions, another striking type of image frequently appears.

These images resemble a "doukui" (a dipper-like shape), with a slightly raised center. There is also a highly distinctive "clan emblem" symbol, shaped like a mystical masked figure, with a doukui-like face below and a prominent central protrusion above. Such images have been found in large numbers at Neolithic cultural sites in the east.

Feng Shi identifies these as the "Xuanji" described in ancient Chinese texts, which the ancients believed represented the "Celestial Pole" (*Tianji*).⁷ Not only have numerous archaeological discoveries confirmed the existence of such artifacts, but textual evidence is also recorded in the *Zhoubi Suanjing* (The Mathematical Classic of the Zhou Gnomon). The so-called Celestial Pole refers to the fixed point in the northern sky (the North Star), around which the Big Dipper rotates, delineating a circular space that the ancients called "Xuanji." Among the seven stars of the Big Dipper, two are specifically named "Xuan" and "Ji." However, when we turn our attention to artifacts of the the Chinese Nation, it is difficult to find traces of this "Celestial Pole" motif with a central protrusion. In stark contrast, the pictographic script of the Naxi people still preserves such forms. For example, their character for "heaven" (*tian*) features this central protrusion (figure 2).



Figure 2. Naxi Ethnic Script Document.

The term "Yi" mentioned here does not refer to a single, narrow entity but encompasses the Bashu civilization and the Dongyi civilization, both of which belong to the river-sea civilization. These two ancient cultural streams predate the "Xia" civilization and, alongside the "Xia" civilization, which belongs to the inland civilization, jointly form the origins of Chinese civilization and its writing system.

It is particularly noteworthy that the character "夷" (Yi) shares not only the same

pronunciation as the character “彝” (Yi) used by the Yi ethnic group in Liangshan, Sichuan, but also carries a similar meaning. Looking back to 1956, when Chairman Mao met with representatives of the Yi ethnic group from Sichuan in Beijing, he instructed that the character “夷,” which had certain derogatory connotations, be changed to “彝.” This change not only reflected respect for ethnic minorities but also conveyed a profound consideration for the integration and inheritance of ethnic cultures.⁸ Therefore, “夷” and “東夷” (Dongyi) are closely related.

The *Classic of Mountains and Seas: Great Wilderness West* also mentions the wind god “夷” of the west, while revealing an intriguing piece of information: “夷” is also referred to as “石夷” (Stone Yi).⁹

Because Shao Hao’s son, “般,” invented the bow and arrow, all people with bird totems regarded carrying bows and arrows as a fashion. Most of them lived in the east, hence they were called “東夷” (Dongyi, Eastern Yi).

The Yellow River is essentially an inland river, with seasonal and intermittent navigation routes. If the Huaxia civilization is considered a continental civilization centered around the Yellow River in the Central Plains of China, then “夷” represents a river-sea civilization centered around the Yangtze River basin, which connects to the sea and extends to Shandong and northern Jiangsu.

According to archaeological judgments based on continental drift, the East Asian civilization centered around China and the Western civilization centered around North Africa and West Asia existed and developed relatively independently over hundreds of thousands of years. While they influenced each other, they maintained distinct civilizational systems. From the perspective of writing and linguistics, the mainstream ideographic writing of the East and the mainstream phonetic writing of the West constitute different systems of writing and civilization. The Chinese script, formed through the overlapping eras of “夷” in the east and “夏” (Xia) in the west, emerged

within the Sino-Tibetan language family, giving rise to a nearly ten-thousand-year-old cultural tradition of Chinese characters and calligraphy. Therefore, our research and discussions on the Sanxingdui and Jinsha site cultures are based on this archaeological and historical understanding, and they have no connection to previous debates about whether Chinese writing and civilization originated from the West.

Academician Feng Shi also reminds us that the groundbreaking assertion of “Yi in the East and Xia in the West” was first proposed by Mr. Fu Sinian. Mr. Fu Sinian argued that the so-called “North-South” structure in ancient China was a relatively recent historical phenomenon that emerged gradually. In contrast, during the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties, as well as in the even more distant eras preceding them, the evolution of political structures from tribes to empires was centered around the basins of the Yellow River, Ji River, and Huai River. He further elaborated: “In this vast land, the geographical landscape was divided primarily along east-west lines, with no clear north-south boundaries. History unfolds through geography, and the two-thousand-year confrontation was between east and west, not north and south. Today, examining ancient geography as a pathway to studying ancient history seems sufficient to demonstrate that during the Three Dynasties and the earlier periods close to them, there were broadly two distinct systems: east and west. The Yi and Shang belonged to the eastern system, while the Xia and Zhou belonged to the western system.”¹⁰

Thus, these two systems engaged in confrontation, which led to conflict; through conflict, they mingled, and through mingling, cultural progress was achieved.

2. Cross-verification of Dongyi Civilization and Bashu Civilization through Script Morphology

Mr. Guo Moruo classified early Chinese Neolithic symbols into two major systems: incised symbols and pictographic symbols. The former, represented by pottery markings from the Banpo site, primarily consist of dot-line geometric configurations; the latter, exemplified by pottery symbols from the Dawenkou site, mainly comprise graphic symbols outlined with linear strokes (The presentation of these two types of symbols was not limited to incision alone; many also exhibited traces of being drawn with writing implements such as brushes or hard pens). He identified these two

categories as dual origins of Chinese character formation, metaphorically designating them as the indicative and pictographic systems. Guo posited that the Shang Dynasty preserved two types of “clan emblems”: one being “incised-system clan emblems” (including what contemporary scholars term “numerical divinatory symbols [shuzigua]),” and the other constituting “pictographic-system clan emblems.” Both categories of emblems were derived from these two Neolithic pottery symbol traditions.¹¹ In recent years, Academician Feng Shi, a leading scholar in the study of ancient Yi script and Dongyi people writing systems, has proposed that the ancient Yi script holds a “mysterious key” capable of unlocking the historical code of “Yi-Xia East-West dynamics” (夷夏東西).¹²

2.1 The Emergence of Script Symbols and Dongyi Clan Emblems

From an ethnological perspective, the Dongyi people played a pivotal role in the formation of the Han ethnic group: they were not only a core component but also consistently held a dominant position within the continuum of ancient cultural traditions.¹³ Through a comprehensive analysis of existing archaeological findings and cultural research results, this paper proposes an academic hypothesis: the rigorous structural design and bold carving techniques evident in this artifact reflect the exceptional artistic mastery of its creator. This discovery demonstrates that the Dongyi people had attained a high level of cultural and artistic accomplishment—their written symbols served not only as semantic tools but also as vehicles for aesthetic expression.¹⁴



Figure 3. Large-mouthed Pottery Jar from Yangling River's Dawenkou Culture unearthed, Photographed by Liu Zhengcheng at Ju County Museum, Shandong.



Figure 4. symbols from Dawenkou Character, Photographed by Liu Zhengcheng at Ju County Museum, Shandong.



Figure 5. Incised symbols unearthed at Sanxingdui. “Sanxingdui Xia Script Archaeological Report” by Sanxingdui Site Sacrificial Area Archaeological Team, Huo Jiaxing. CCTV13 News Image, photographed by @Weng Weihe. Transferred and stored by Henan Guo Jianqiang eff9hycr on December 3, 2023. See Li Baifeng, *Studies on the Eastern Yi - Study on the Ge Tribe*, Qilu Publishing House, First Edition September 1981, p. 23.



Figure 6. Compound character in ancient Yi script on a bronze artifact unearthed at Sanxingdui. “Sanxingdui Xia Script Archaeological Report” by Sanxingdui Site Sacrificial Area Archaeological Team, Huo Jiaxing. CCTV13 News Image, photographed by @Weng Weihe. Transferred and stored by Henan Guo Jianqiang eff9hycr on December 3, 2023. See Li Baifeng, *Studies on the Eastern Yi - Study on the Ge Tribe*, Qilu Publishing House, First Edition September 1981, p. 23.



Figure 7. Phrase symbol clan emblem on the *Simu Xin* (Queen Mother Xin) Square Ding unearthed at Yinxu.

Simu Xin Square Ding, vessel name designated by Guo Moruo, later proposed to be changed to “Houmu Xin” (Queen Mother Xin) by archaeology and paleography scholars.

2.2 Deciphering the Dongyi script through ancient Yi script has enabled the interpretation of the inscriptions on Zouping Dinggong pottery vessels

Within the academic framework of ancient script studies, Academician Feng Shi, leveraging his exceptional scholarly insight, meticulously curated eight prehistoric script and calligraphic works from *the 100-volume Complete Collection of Chinese Calligraphy, Vol. 1: Oracle Bone Script*.¹⁵

Meanwhile, Mr. Zhao Dejing from the Institute of World Cultural Geography (Hong Kong) has garnered widespread attention thanks to his published article titled *Ancient Yi Script: One of the World's Six Major Ancient Writing Systems*.¹⁶ Through rigorous academic deliberations, the group reached a groundbreaking conclusion: “The ancient Yi script, along with the Oracle Bone Script, Sumerian cuneiform, Egyptian hieroglyphs, Maya hieroglyphs, and the Harappan script, is recognized as one of the six major ancient writing systems in the world. Furthermore, it represents a pivotal origin point in the global evolution of writing systems.”¹⁷

Academician Feng Shi utilized ancient Yi script to decipher the 11 characters inscribed on this pottery fragment (Figure 8) using the Five Elements system. Based on the residual stroke traces at the lower-left edge, it is likely that the original inscription

contained more than 11 characters.¹⁸ Through his analysis, these characters exhibit a formal written structure, thereby confirming their status as a script.



Figure 8. Pottery from Longshan Culture in Shandong. Collection of Shandong University. See Feng Shi, *Shangputang Collected Works - Interpretation of the Longshan Period Writing from Dinggong, Shandong*.

2.3 Deciphering the inscriptions on the Sanxingdui imperial seals using ancient Yi script

The literal translation reads “Eagle Eye Guards the Homeland,” while the free translation reads “Eagle Eye Guards the Territory” (Figure 9). This breakthrough offers a new perspective for understanding the underlying sense of national protection and territorial consciousness inherent in the Sanxingdui civilization.¹⁹

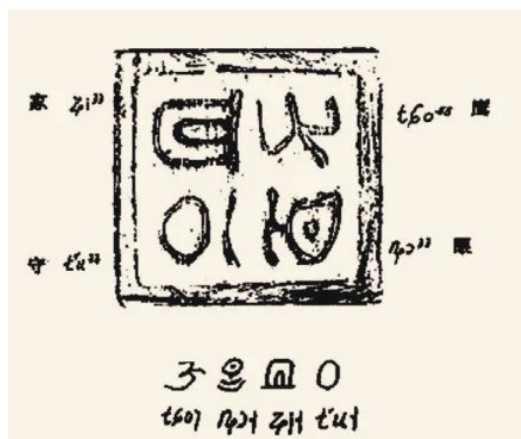


Figure 9. Ancient Yi Script. Deciphered. Yi People's Network Cultural Museum



Figure 10. Rubbing of the Sanxingdui "Tadpole Script" Dragon Seal Impression. Li Dunyan, "Sanxingdui Dragon Seal Deciphered as 'Hao Yu Can Cong', Unveiling the Mystery". Baidu, Sanxingdui Forum. Woma Xiansheng4566, 2021-12-23 IP; Refer to: UFO Exploration <http://www.ufo-1.cn>. "Yi Culture is the Password to Decipher Sanxingdui Civilization".



Figure 11. *Joulou Stele* (also known as *Yu Wang Stele*) at the Mausoleum of Yu the Great in Shaoxing. See Feng Jianrong, “The Monument to Yu the Great Carved in Stone”, “Shaoxing Daily”, April 17, 2024, Page 06, “Shaoxing Culture and History” column.

2.4 The Dongyi Script Symbols on the Anau Stone Seal and “Shang Seals”: Tracing the International Origins of Writing Systems

In June 2000, Dr. Hiebert from the University of Pennsylvania discovered a black jade seal (figure 12) beneath the remains of a multi-room adobe structure during excavations at the Anau site in Turkmenistan. The seal face is square, with sides slightly less than 1 inch (approximately 2.54 cm), and features a horizontal tile-shaped knob on its back. Five enigmatic symbols are incised on the seal face, their strokes retaining traces of red pigment, heightening its mystique. Radiocarbon dating of associated artifacts confirmed its age to be 2300 BCE. On May 12, 2001, at an academic symposium at Harvard University, Dr. Hilbert presented the seal, asserting it bore “engraved symbols and script.”²⁰ This claim ignited intense debates across global academia regarding the origins of Chinese writing, “forcing scholars to re-examine the origins of Chinese writing through a fundamentally different lens.”²¹



Figure 12. Stone seal unearthed at the Anau site, Turkmenistan. This seal was excavated in June 2000 by Dr. Fredrik Hiebert of the University of Pennsylvania at the Anau site, Turkmenistan. The image was published in the first issue of 2001 of *Chinese Calligraphy* magazine, forwarded by Mr. Li Xueqin.

The Anau stone seal has been radiocarbon-dated to 2300 BCE, meaning it predates the three previously discovered yet undeciphered “Shang seals” inscribed with symbolic characters.

The mysterious red residues on the seal further reinforce this visual connection. From an epigraphic perspective, the seal dates back several centuries before the earliest known oracle bone inscriptions. Through meticulous analysis, Li De broke down the symbols on the seal into five independent character forms based on their stroke-linkage relationships and tentatively deduced their sequence as: “Wu,” “Yi,” “Ji,” “Mu,” and “Ze.” Of particular significance, he also identified a corresponding pattern for each of these character forms within the prehistoric Dawenkou pottery symbols associated with the Dongyi civilization.²²



Figure 13. Imprint of one of the three so-called “Shang Dynasty Seals.”

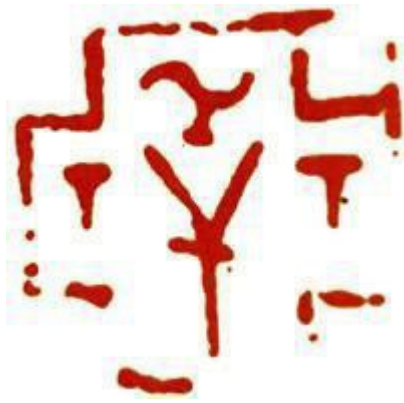


Figure 14. Imprint of the second of the three so-called “Shang Dynasty Seals.”



Figure 15. Imprint of the third of the three so-called “Shang Dynasty Seals.”

2.5 Deciphering the Oracle Bone Script of the Peiligang Culture in Wuyang through Ancient Yi Script



Figure 16. "Ji" (吉 - auspicious) character on a Peiligang Culture turtle shell from Jiahu, Wuyang, Henan.

Through an in-depth analysis of the graphic structure of the carved characters on the turtle shells, Mr. Feng Shi discovered that the character "ji" bears a morphological resemblance to the character "mu" (representing an eye) found in the oracle bone script of the Shang Dynasty; this suggests that the character may have originally depicted an eye.²³ However, identical glyphs also appear on ritual jade bi discs from the Liangzhu culture, complicating interpretations based solely on oracle bone script conventions. Integrating multidisciplinary archaeological evidence, Feng posits that the Jiahu culture belonged to the Dongyi cultural system, and thus its script should not be classified as traditional Chinese characters but rather as ancient Yi script. Cross-referencing extant ancient Yi script, the character for "ji" (吉) mirrors the "mu" (目) glyph, confirming that the Jiahu shell inscription corresponds to the ancient Yi character "ji."

3. Research on Ancient Yi and the Origins of Yinxu Oracle Bone Script

According to Zhou Youguang, the Yi script of Sichuan is a syllabic script, representing modern Yi writing. In contrast, the Yunnan Yi script is a hybrid writing system that combines ideographic and phonetic elements; it is also known as the Ancient Yi

Script.²⁴ This ideographic writing system—also known as the ancient Yi ethnic language script or traditional/ancient Yi script—has been in use for thousands of years in the Yunnan and Guizhou regions. Unlike the standardized Yi script system based on the Latin alphabet, which was introduced in the Liangshan area of Sichuan Province, the ancient Yi script is an indigenous writing system that did not directly borrow or imitate Chinese characters. In contrast, the standardized Yi script (similar to Latinized Chinese systems such as Pinyin) represents a deliberate phonetic adaptation of the traditional Yi script.²⁵

The ancient Yi script (古彝文, also known as ancient Yi ethnolinguistic script) inscribed on the white marble stele (figure 17) preserved in the Liangshan Autonomous Prefecture has proven instrumental in deciphering contemporaneous logographic systems, including the oracle bone inscriptions from the Peiligang culture in Wuyang, Henan, the Dinggong pottery inscriptions of the Longshan culture in Zouping, Shandong, and the seal script from Sanxingdui. It also exhibits homomorphic and synonymous correspondence with the “heaven-earth compound symbols” (天地合文) found in Dongyi clan emblems from the Dawenkou culture at Ju County, Shandong.

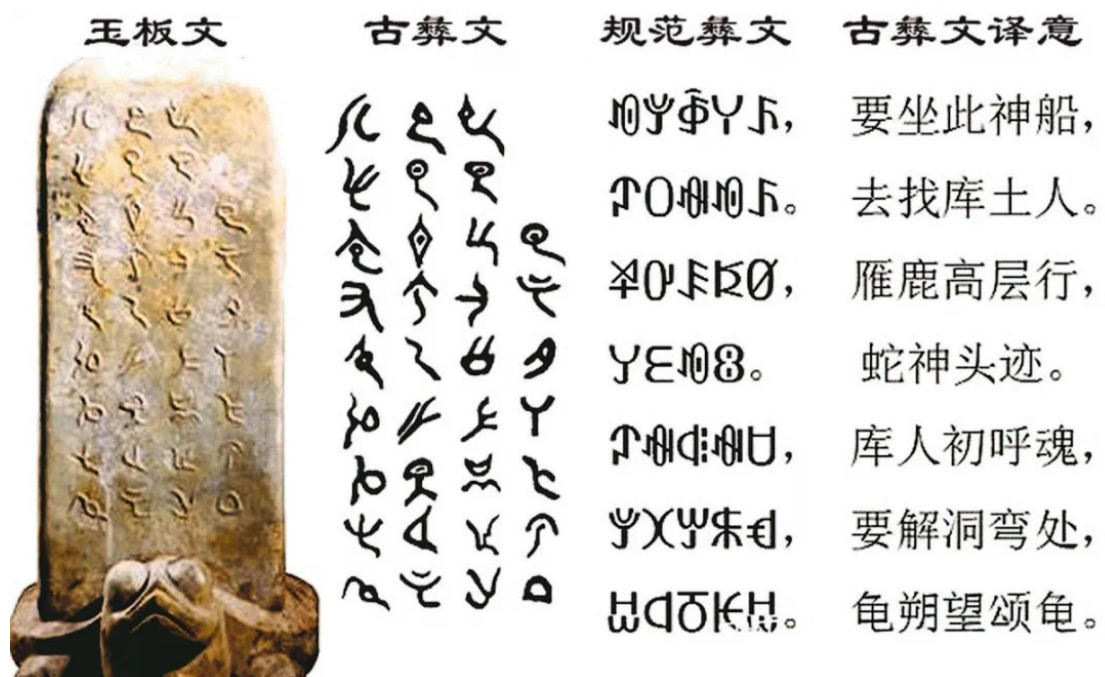


Figure 17. Ancient Yi Script Stele in White Marble, Collection of Liangshan Autonomous Prefecture.

The legendary account of “Cangjie, historian of the Yellow Emperor, creating characters” (黃帝之史倉頡造字) likely reflects a transformative reform of preexisting ancient Yi script during the Yellow Emperor’s reign.²⁶

Regarding the duration of this phase, estimates vary across different studies; Chen Mengjia suggests that it lasted at least 500 years and can be traced back to approximately 1700 BCE.²⁷ The symbols unearthed at the Banpo Site (circa 4500 BCE) were classified by Qiu Xigui as “Type A symbols,” whereas the symbols discovered at the Dawenkou Site (circa 2700–2500 BCE) were classified as “Type B symbols.” Guo Moruo argued that Type A symbols predated Type B symbols and represented the earliest forms of writing; however, Qiu Xigui held the opposite view, contending that Type A symbols did not meet the definition of writing, whereas Type B symbols could be used to record personal and object names, making them closer to true writing systems. In 1978, Qiu Xigui initially interpreted the symbols found on Dawenkou pottery as clan insignia resembling those used during the Shang Dynasty; however, he revised this interpretation in 1989 and 1993, ultimately concluding that neither type of symbol constituted genuine writing systems. He proposed that Chinese characters formed a complete writing system during the transition period between the Xia and Shang dynasties (around the mid-3rd millennium BCE, approximately 2500 BCE), in which Type B symbols could be regarded as the upper limit of primitive writing, while fully developed writing systems emerged thereafter.²⁸ Later symbols from the Dinggong site (c. 2300–1800 BCE) and Longqiuzhuang site (c. 2000 BCE), dating to the broader Longshan period when China entered the Chalcolithic era with urban centers and clustered symbolic clusters, are widely regarded as proto-writing. However, Qiu Xigui deemed these symbols a “misguided path” due to their lack of direct connection to oracle bone script²⁹. I find this view overly cautious. Considering that “Ancient Yi script”— “Ancient Cangjie script”—can decipher many early symbols, exhibits a complete ideographic system, and demonstrates enduring continuity, it is more reasonable to recognize them as proto-writing.

Faced with the frequent breakthroughs in modern archaeological achievements, to advance related research, it is imperative to utilize the ancient historical records documented in the mature Han characters formed after the Yinxu Oracle Bone Script.

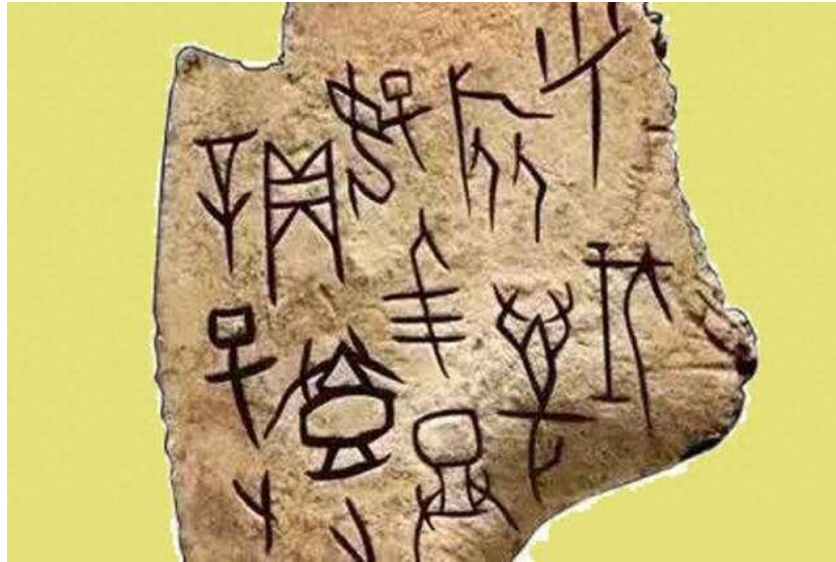


Figure 18. Oracle bone concerning Fu Hao's campaign against the Qiangfang tribe. Chen Mengjia, *A Comprehensive Study of the Oracle Bone Inscriptions from Yinxu - Geography of States*.

4. Conclusion

For instance, Professor Liu Zhiyi of Inner Mongolia, based on “ancient Yi script artifacts unearthed worldwide,” claims a historical lineage linking the ancient Yi script → Sumerian script → Latin script → English, German, French, and Russian scripts³⁰. Scholar Ban Yuan asserts, after comparing the ancient Yi script with Sumerian script, that the former is the “progenitor of Western European scripts.” Yunnan scholar Gelong Ahong supports Liu Zhiyi's view, arguing that since Western scholars acknowledge Sumerian cuneiform as the ancestor of Western phonetic scripts while speculating Chinese civilization's westward transmission due to similarities with Shang Oracle Bone Script, Liu's claim that “China's ancient Yi script is the origin of Western scripts” is not unfounded.³¹ However, such claims lack rigorous papers published in formal academic conferences or journals and fail to substantiate arguments through multi-disciplinary methodologies. These hasty assertions neither gain acceptance from mainstream Chinese scholars nor Western academia, nor do they aid in advancing research on the Ba-Shu civilization or the dissemination of ancient Yi script studies.

International Calligraphers Association

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⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ “夷” is equivalent to “彝.” As interpreted in oracle bone inscriptions: “The east is called *Xi*, and its wind is called *Xie*; the south is called *Jia*, and its wind is called *Wei*; the west is called *Yi*, and its wind is called *Yi*; the north is called *Wan*, and its wind is called *Yi*.” Feng Shi, “Revisiting Chinese Civilization

from the Perspective of the Origins of Writing,” Lecture at the Institute of Advanced Studies in Arts and Humanities, Chinese National Academy of Arts, (July 20, 2020), 18:15.

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