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# 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. Moreover, Chinese civilization, with its developmental trajectory of writing, also carries a long and illustrious history, shining brightly.

## Key Words

Native characteristics of East Asian civilization, Yanhuang Culture, origins of Chinese Characters, Sanxingdui, sheep totem, ancient Qiang and Yi scripts, cracle bone inscriptions

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

### 1.1 Two Theories on Human and Civilizational Origins

The question of human origins resembles a mysterious labyrinth, with the traditional assertion that “humans originated in Africa” remaining at the center of intense academic debate, surrounded by unceasing controversy. Looking back to the 1960s, significant archaeological discoveries were made in China: primitive human fossils were unearthed in Lantian, Shaanxi, and Yuanmou, Yunnan. Following the convention of naming based on discovery sites, they were solemnly named “Lantian Man” and “Yuanmou Man”. Among these, Yuanmou Man, with an estimated age of approximately 1.7 million years, stands proudly in the long river of human evolution, predating the then-known appearance

of African primitive humans. This discovery once prompted a re-examination and fervent discussion of the human origin site, with some scholars firmly advocating it as a key clue to human origins.

In molecular biology and genetics, humans are considered to have a single origin. This theory unequivocally posits that human populations in other regions of the world, like stars scattered across the sky, originated from a specific region, akin to a cradle of civilization, and gradually spread and settled across the globe through millennia of migration. The East Asian origin theory, based on the upper limit of genetic diversity, suggests that humans originated 17.6 million years ago, with modern humans emerging in East Asia and subsequently dispersing worldwide. In contrast, the African origin theory, grounded in the molecular clock and neutral theory, holds a different view, proposing that humans originated 7 million years ago, with modern

humans emerging in Africa before spreading globally.

From the macroscopic perspective of modern scientific research, the ancestors of modern humans most likely originated in either East Asia or Africa. In other words, the genealogical roots of other human populations on Earth can largely be traced back to the arduous and legendary migration journeys that began in East Asia or Africa. Today, ancient DNA testing technology acts as an impartial witness to history, with its results resoundingly indicating that the genes of extant populations predominantly carry East Asian lineage. Furthermore, insights gleaned from the precious “pages of history” found in East Asian ancient human fossils reveal that the evolutionary process of ancient humans in East Asia resembles an uninterrupted, smoothly flowing river, continuous and coherent.

Guided by the East Asian origin theory, the migration routes of modern humans unfold like a grand and majestic map, revealing before our eyes a tapestry of paths, each bearing the weight of humanity’s courageous exploration and pursuit of hope.

The author of this monumental historical work once stood at the crossroads of historical research and posed a thought-provoking question in *A Global History*: 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?<sup>1</sup> This question, like a stone cast into the deep waters of academia, has stirred waves of debate, and to this day, no universally convincing and flawless answer has been reached on a global scale.

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.<sup>2</sup> 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. 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.

## 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. However, as archaeological excavations have progressed, like a mysterious door slowly opening, the continuously deciphered archaeological materials—especially the historical truths reflected in early writing—have pierced through the fog like beams of strong light, clearly revealing that this was not the case. At the source of Chinese civilization, Chinese characters were not the sole dominant force. Looking back at the long period before the establishment of the Xia Dynasty, the pattern of civilization was one of pluralistic coexistence, not a single, highly unified model. Instead, it vividly exhibited the “Yi in the East and Xia in the West” structure. In short, the two distinct cultures represented by “Yi” and “Xia” were like two radiant stars shining in mutual reflection, each illuminating the vast historical sky of ancient Chinese civilization over an extended period.

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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> From today’s perspective, whether analyzed through archaeological

studies or the origins of writing, Fu Sinian's argument holds. The prehistoric cultures east of the Taihang Mountains exhibit entirely different characteristics from those to the west. To illustrate this, he provides three examples.

The first to catch the eye is a mysterious jade plaque unearthed at Lingjiatan in Hanshan, Anhui, dating back approximately 5,300 years. This artifact, like a historical messenger traversing time and space, carries the memories of antiquity. 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.<sup>5</sup> 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). Thus, through this archaeological thread, the ancient civilization east of the Taihang Mountains is

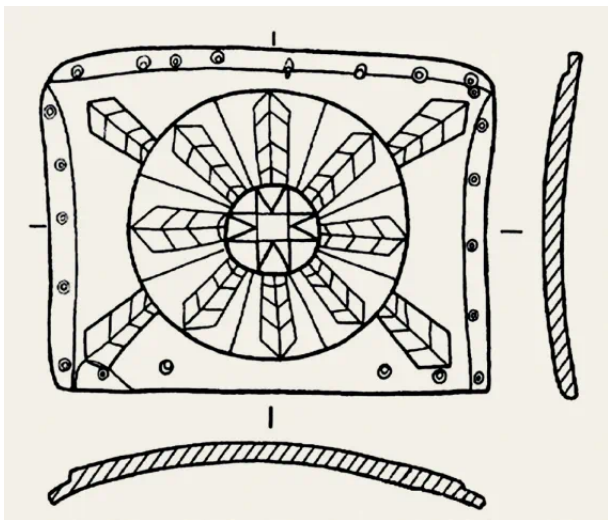


Figure 1. A jade plaque dating back approximately 5,300 years is identical to the "Bagua" (Eight Trigrams) in ancient Yi language.

intricately connected to the cultural heritage of today's southwestern ethnic minorities, forming a cultural bridge that spans time and space.

Turning our gaze to the vast expanse stretching from eastern Inner Mongolia to Shandong, Jiangsu, Hunan, and Jiangxi, we find a constellation of brilliant prehistoric cultures, including the Xiaoheyan culture, Dawenkou culture, Majiabang culture, Songze culture, Liangzhu culture, and Daxi culture. This region is vividly referred to by scholars as the "Crescent-Shaped Cultural Transmission Belt of the Borderlands." Its cultural characteristics stand out like a unique banner, sharply contrasting with the primitive cultures of the West, typified by the Yangshao culture. 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.<sup>6</sup>

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*).<sup>7</sup> 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 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).

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





Figure 2. Naxi Ethnic Script Document.

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.<sup>8</sup> 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).<sup>9</sup>

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.”<sup>10</sup>

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.<sup>11</sup>

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). He argues that the Dinggong pottery inscriptions from Zouping, Shandong—decipherable through ancient Yi script—and the incised oracle bone symbols from the Peiligang culture site at Jiahu, Henan, dating to an earlier archaeological period, jointly demonstrate that Yi civilization and Xia (夏) civilization formed two sequential yet contemporaneous mainstream structures in the development of Chinese civilization.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, Feng contends that interpreting the Sanxingdui seal script via ancient Yi script reveals the Bashu civilization (represented by the Sanxingdui and Jinsha sites) as a parallel branch of Yi culture that coexisted with Xia culture, ultimately converging into the unified tapestry of Chinese antiquity. This provides compelling evidence for the “diverse-yet-integrated” paradigm of early Chinese civilization.

In the following analysis, I will draw upon my 2023 study of twenty incised symbols on large-mouthed jars from the Dawenkou culture excavated at Lingyanghe, Ju County. These symbols, determined through research to be collective Dongyi clan emblems rather than isolated

proto-characters, will serve as the foundation for explicating the interconnectedness of ancient Yi script and Dongyi civilization.

### 2.1 The Emergence of Script Symbols and Dongyi Clan Emblems

In the academic field of prehistoric ethnic studies, Mr. Li Baifeng notes in *Miscellaneous Studies on the Dongyi* (《東夷雜考》) that ethnic identities during the prehistoric period were fluid and indistinct. First, from the perspective of ethnic origins tracing, the Dongyi constituted the “indigenous foundation” among eastern ethnic groups, maintaining relatively independent cultural continuity with minimal assimilation compared to neighboring populations. Second, before the Xia Dynasty, migratory groups such as the Yan Emperor’s clan and the Yellow Emperor’s clan integrated into the region as “external settlers,” their cultural elements clashing and merging with the indigenous Dongyi culture. Third, during the socially turbulent Xia period, many people were forced to migrate due to warfare and competition for survival resources, eventually converging in Dongyi territories as new “immigrant communities.” Fourth, during the Shang Dynasty, repeated relocations of the capital under King Cheng Tang led some groups to remain in their original locations during migrations, becoming local “remnant populations.” From an ethnological perspective, the Dongyi peoples played a pivotal role in the formation of the Han ethnicity, serving as a core component and maintaining dominant status in the lineage of ancient cultural traditions.<sup>13</sup>

Through a comprehensive analysis of existing archaeological discoveries and cultural studies, this paper proposes an academic hypothesis: the Dongyi people were likely descendants of the Yan Emperor Shennong’s lineage. Reverently worshipping the sun deity and adopting the sheep as a totem, they cultivated a unique regional culture in the vast Yangtze River basin. As history progressed, they were assimilated by the Yellow Emperor Xuanyuan’s lineage from the Central Plains’ Yellow River basin, initiating a new chapter in the integration and development of the Huaxia civilization. This process reveals the profound ethnic fusion embedded in the term “descendants of Yan and Huang” (炎黃子孫).

The large-mouthed jars (figure 3) of the Dawenkou culture, excavated at Lingyanghe in Ju County, Shandong, provide invaluable material evidence for studying the origins of writing. These 20 jars carry rich historical significance, with their incised symbols sparking extensive scholarly debate. Interpretations





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

vary based on academic expertise and perspectives. Regarding the symbol in figure 4, Yu Xingwu deciphered it as the character *dan* (旦), interpreting it as a compound ideograph combining three elements: a sun, clouds, and a five-peaked mountain. Tang Lan argued that it represents a fusion of “sun, fire, and mountain,” or simplified as the character *jiong* (炆). Feng Shi classified the symbol within the ancient Yi script, proposing it as a combined graph for “heaven” (天) and “earth” (地). He emphasized its rigorous structure and bold incisions, reflecting the carver’s exceptional artistry. This suggests the Dongyi people had attained a high level of cultural and artistic sophistication, where script symbols served not only as semantic tools but also as vehicles for aesthetic expression.<sup>14</sup>

Through in-depth research and cross-regional comparisons of early script forms, this study posits that the symbol is not an individual character but a Dongyi clan emblem. Before the formal emergence of writing, human societies universally relied on knotting records, where each knot represented a specific event rather than a discrete lexical concept. Inspired by this, the incised symbols on the Lingyanghe large-mouthed jars in Ju County should not be isolated as single characters but interpreted as cohesive lexical phrases. This cognitive framework parallels Egyptian hieroglyphs and Mesopotamian cuneiform script, such as the Egyptian practice of grouping ideographic elements within brackets to convey complex information. Similarly, these symbols cannot be decomposed through conventional Chinese character analysis; as integrated phrases, they encapsulate the Dongyi people’s collective cognition, religious beliefs, and nascent worldview.

Expanding this perspective, a general hypothesis on script origins emerges: all writing systems, Eastern or Western, began not with isolated characters or words but with meaningful lexical clusters. Only through prolonged historical development did distinct phonetic and semantic systems crystallize from the chaos of thought and language, establishing formal relationships in form, sound, meaning, and grammar.

Thus, the three symbols on the jars are not individual Chinese characters but a symbolic phrase representing the Dongyi’s sun deity worship and religious worldview. Recurring across Jiangsu’s northern coastal regions, these symbols suggest that during the early Dawenkou culture (6500–4500 BP), writing remained in its embryonic symbolic stage. The jar’s ideographs centered on solar worship, linking to ritual practices as spiritual conduits for communicating with celestial and earthly deities, laying foundations for later script evolution and cultural continuity.

Extending this analysis to Sanxingdui’s incised symbols reveals a cross-temporal cultural dialogue. Decipherable through ancient Yi script, some scholars term these “Xia script,” sparking debates about interregional cultural exchanges. Beyond the explicit directional characters (east, south, west, north), the central symbols strikingly resemble the Dongyi “heaven-earth” compound emblem (figure 5). Further examination of Sanxingdui’s ritual bronze inscriptions (figure 6) shows structural parallels with clan emblems on Yinxu bronzes (figure 7), suggesting covert connections in script usage and transmission across regional civilizations. These findings provide critical philological evidence for the pluralistic-yet-integrated framework of ancient Chinese civilization.

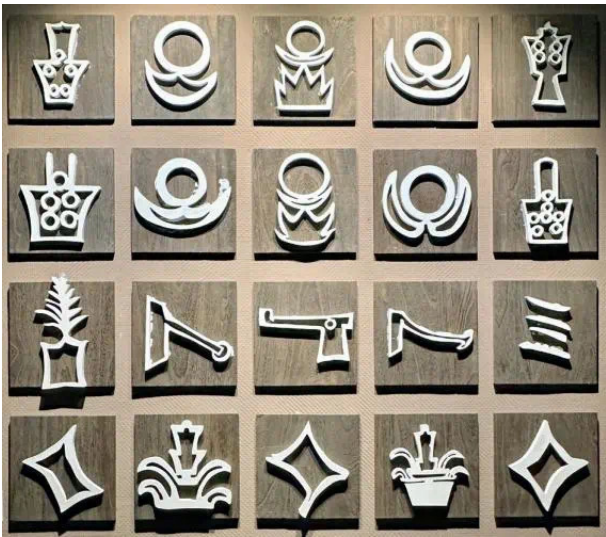


Figure 4. Character symbols from Dawenkou Culture at Lingyang River, Ju County. Photographed by Liu Zhengcheng at Ju County Museum, Shandong.

## 2.2 Deciphering Dongyi Script through Ancient Yi Script: Decoding the Dinggong Pottery Inscriptions from Zouping

In the academic framework of ancient script studies, Academician Feng Shi, with exceptional scholarly insight, meticulously selected eight prehistoric writing and calligraphic works from *the 100-volume Complete Collection of Chinese Calligraphy, Vol. 1: Oracle Bone Script*. Focusing on the 8,000-year period preceding the Shang Dynasty oracle bone script (around 1100 BCE) unearthed at Yinxu, Anyang, he established a developmental lineage for script and calligraphy, articulating his academic theories through rigorous textual research. This pioneering study provides crucial guidance for subsequent scholars to explore the origins, evolution, and artistic connections of ancient writing systems.<sup>15</sup>

Concurrently, Mr. Zhao Dejing of the World Cultural Geography Research Institute (Hong Kong) garnered significant attention with his article *Ancient Yi Script: One of the World's Six Major Ancient Writing Systems*.<sup>16</sup> The study, spearheaded by the Hong Kong World Cultural Geography Research Institute in collaboration with authoritative institutions including the Hong Kong World Heritage Institute, China Intangible Assets Research Institute, and Asia-Pacific Center for Assessment of Humanistic and Ecological Values, established the “Comparative Research Group on Ancient Yi Script and World Ancient Scripts.” Through rigorous academic deliberations, the group reached a groundbreaking conclusion: “Ancient Yi script stands alongside Chinese Oracle Bone Script, Sumerian

cuneiform, Egyptian hieroglyphs, Mayan glyphs, and Harappan script as one of the world's six major ancient writing systems. Moreover, it represents a pivotal origin point in the global evolution of writing.”<sup>17</sup>

While this conclusion has sparked intense debate within the academic community, with some perspectives requiring further verification, it has opened new horizons for the study of ancient Yi script, compelling scholars to reassess its position and value within the global framework of script origins.

Taking the Dinggong pottery inscriptions unearthed at the Dinggong site in Zouping, Shandong, in 1991 as a case study, archaeologists date them to the late Longshan culture. The 11 symbols on the pottery constitute a textual passage. Although they resemble oracle bone script, their archaeological context predates the Yinxu oracle bones by nearly a millennium. At that time, writing systems were still in a nascent exploratory phase, rendering these inscriptions persistently resistant to decipherment within established Chinese character frameworks. This has solidified their status as an enduring enigma in the field of paleography.

Academician Feng Shi deciphered the eleven characters incised in five rows on the pottery fragment (figure 8) using ancient Yi script. Based on residual stroke traces on the lower left edge, it is inferred that the original text likely exceeded eleven characters.<sup>18</sup> Through his analysis, these characters exhibit a formal written structure, confirming their identity as script. A comparative study of their form with Shang Dynasty oracle bone script reveals stark differences, definitively proving that the Dinggong pottery inscriptions do not belong to the Chinese character system. Conversely, their structural features align remarkably with ancient Yi script, categorizing them unequivocally within the Dongyi script tradition and indicating they belong to the same unique writing system as ancient Yi script.

Further interpretation of the text yields the translation: “Spirit divination: Ancestor Pu-Du prays, announces auspicious longevity, (with) a hundred roosters’ twisted claws...” Semantically, this is identified as a divinatory text invoking ancestral protection and warding off evil. The script’s rigorous composition and masterful incisions mark it as the most extensive and information-rich Neolithic writing discovered in China, offering invaluable primary evidence for studying the cultural and social structures of ancient Dongyi communities.

## 2.3 Deciphering Sanxingdui Seal Script through Ancient Yi Script

The Sanxingdui site, a radiant gem of ancient Chinese civilization, contains artifacts imbued with immense





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. Unearthed in 1976 from Tomb No. 5 at Xiaotun, Yinxu, Anyang. Collection of the Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

historical significance, among which its inscribed seal script has become a focal point of academic inquiry. On April 15, 2009, Yi scholar Ayu Tieri achieved a groundbreaking decipherment of the Sanxingdui seal script using the knowledge system of ancient Yi script. His literal translation reads “Eagle Eye Guards the Home” (鷹眼守家), while the interpretative translation is “Eagle Eye Protects the Territory” (鷹眼守護疆域) (figure 9). This breakthrough offers fresh perspectives for understanding potential ethno-protective consciousness and territorial concepts embedded within the Sanxingdui civilization.<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, the textual content carried by the Sanxingdui “tadpole script” dragon seal rubbing (figure 10) remains undeciphered. Its cryptic inscriptions continue to fuel scholarly exploration. Notably, the *Julu Stele* (also known as the *Yu Wang Stele*, figure 11) at the Mausoleum of Yu the Great in Shaoxing exhibits script forms strikingly like those of the Sanxingdui tadpole script dragon seal. Scholars speculate that they belong to the same scriptural system, with ancient Yi script further showing intricate connections to *Cangjie’s Script* (《倉頡書》) and *Xia Yu’s Script* (《夏禹書》). These parallels suggest complex intermingling dynamics in script transmission across disparate regions and eras, offering multifaceted clues for reconstructing the lineage of ancient Chinese civilization.

#### 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.”<sup>20</sup> 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.”<sup>21</sup>

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 Shang Dynasty (c1600–



Figure 8. Pottery inscription from Longshan Culture unearthed in Zouping, Shandong. Collection of Shandong University. See Feng Shi, *Shangputang Collected Works - Interpretation of the Longshan Period Writing from Dinggong, Shandong*, China Social Sciences Press, 2021, 15-50.

1046 BCE), traditionally regarded as China’s second dynasty and the first with contemporaneous written records, is also known as the Yin-Shang period. Consequently, Dr. Hiebert’s identification of the Anau seal directly suggests its existence before the Shang Dynasty. This debate over the so-called “origins of writing” implies that ancient Shang script may have derived from Central or Western Asian influences.

Prominent Chinese paleographer Li Xueqin swiftly engaged with this academic discourse. After reviewing the relevant *New York Times* coverage, he authored two seminal articles: “The Stone Seal Unearthed at the Anau Site in Central Asia” (published in *China Cultural Relics News* on July 4, 2001) and “The Enlightenment of the Anau Stone Seal” (published later that year in *Chinese Calligraphy*). In these works, Li observed that the Anau seal’s form—square face and tile-shaped knob—diverged starkly from seal traditions in Western Asia and the Indus Valley (including stamp and cylinder seals), instead closely resembling later Chinese seals. The enigmatic red residue within its incised strokes further deepened this visual kinship. Chronologically, the seal predates the earliest known oracle bone script by centuries.

Through meticulous analysis, Li deconstructed the seal’s symbols into five discrete graphs based on stroke connectivity, tentatively sequenced as: wu (五), yi (一), ji (己), mu (木), and zhé (丩). Crucially, he identified parallels for each graph among prehistoric Dawenkou pottery symbols linked to Dongyi civilization.<sup>22</sup> This discovery challenges the “Western origin theory” of Chinese writing and provides critical evidence for exploring indigenous, multilinear origins of Chinese script, radically expanding scholarly perspectives on the issue.

Since the last century, academia has identified three stone seals dubbed the “Shang Seals” (figures 13–15),



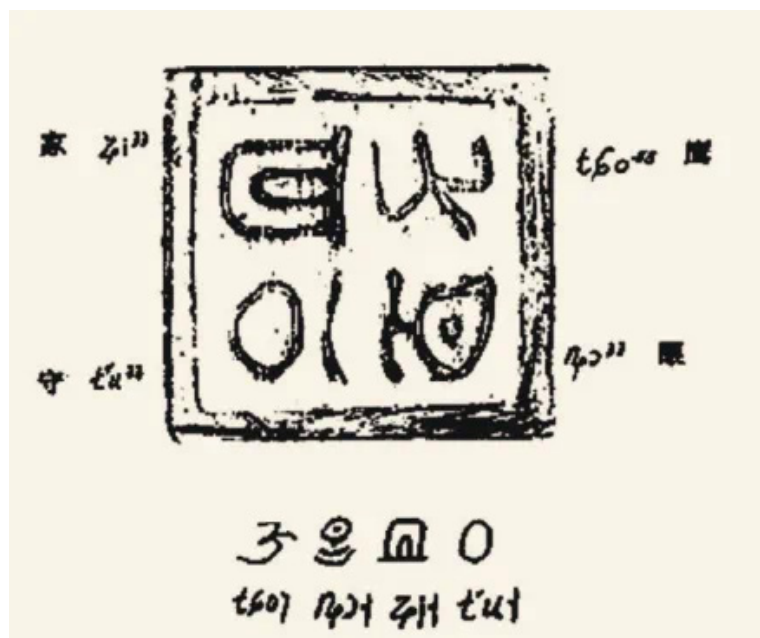


Figure 9. Ancient Yi Script. Deciphered by A Yu Tieri in 2009 as “Eagle Eye Protecting the Home and Sanxingdui Dragon Seal”. Yi People’s Network Cultural Museum: <http://www.yizuren.com/yistudy/yxjlygd/20432.html>.

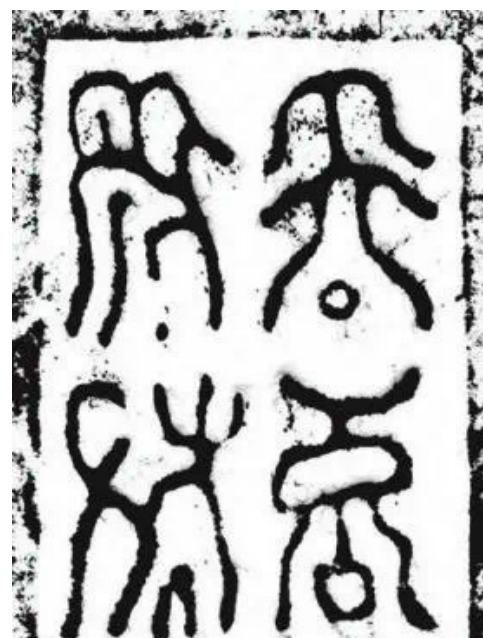


Figure 10. Rubbing of the Sanxingdui “Tadpole Script” Dragon Seal Impression. Li Dunyan, “Sanxingdui Dragon Seal Deciphered as ‘Hao Yu Can Cong’, Unveiling the Mystery”. Baidu, Sanxingdui Forum. Woma Xiansheng4566, 2021-12-23 IP; Refer to: UFO Exploration <http://www.ufo-1.cn>. “Yi Culture is the Password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

regarded as the earliest origins of Chinese seal culture. Despite decades of efforts by paleographers, these ancient seals remain undeciphered, with no consensus. Through a comprehensive analysis integrating findings from the Anau seal and Sanxingdui script studies, this

study argues that the oracle bone script from Yinxu, Anyang—representing a mature writing system—differs fundamentally from these “Shang Seals,” which likely do not belong to the Shang Dynasty. Comparative analysis with the Sanxingdui seal inscription deciphered via ancient Yi script as “Eagle Eye Guards the Home” reveals striking morphological parallels, strongly suggesting the “Shang Seals” predate the Shang period and share both a common script system and comparable developmental stage with Sanxingdui’s emblematic writing.

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

The Jiahu site of the Peiligang culture in Wuyang, Henan, stands as a pivotal locus for research into the origins of Chinese civilization. Among its artifacts, the incised symbols on tortoise shells hold exceptional academic significance. One such shell bears the character “ji” (吉) (figure 16), radiocarbon-dated to 9000–7100 BCE, redirecting scholarly focus on the origins of writing to an even more remote prehistoric era.

Through in-depth analysis of the graphic structure of the incised characters on tortoise shells, Mr. Feng Shi observed that the character “ji” (吉) resembles the Shang





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.

Dynasty oracle bone character “mu” (目) (eye) in form, suggesting it may originally depict an eye.<sup>23</sup> 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.”

Synthesizing these case studies, the temporal scope of archaeological materials decipherable through ancient Yi script has been extended to encompass symbols from the Early Neolithic to Late Paleolithic periods. Exemplified by the incised oracle bone symbols at the Peiligang culture site in Wuyang, Henan—dated to 7900–9000 BCE—these findings provide critical spatial-temporal coordinates and material evidence for investigating the origins, evolution, and cross-cultural connections of ancient Yi script. This breakthrough holds potential to further unveil the enigma surrounding the origins of Chinese writing in future research.

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

#### 3.1 Can “Ancient Yi Script” Be Termed “Ancient Cangjie Script”?

Within the field of paleography, the classification of “ancient Yi script” (古彝文) has sparked significant scholarly debate. A fundamental question arises: does a direct genealogical relationship exist between ancient Yi script (a logographic system) and modern Yi script (a

phonetic system derived from Latin-based orthography)? Their structural and functional disparities are as profound as those between Tangut script and Japanese kana (both derived from Chinese characters yet not classified as “new Chinese characters”). In the absence of conclusive evidence, the provisional labeling of ancient Yi script as “Cangjie script” (倉頡文)—named after the legendary inventor of Chinese characters—remains a contentious proposition worthy of critical examination.

According to Zhou Youguang, the Yi script of Sichuan is a syllabic script, representing modern Yi writing. In contrast, the Yi script of Yunnan is a hybrid system combining logographic and phonetic elements, known as ancient Yi script.<sup>24</sup> This logographic script, also referred to as ancient Yi ethnolinguistic script (古夷文) or traditional/old Yi script, has been continuously used for millennia in Yunnan and Guizhou. Unlike the standardized Yi script (規範彝文)—a Latin-based phonetic system implemented in Liangshan, Sichuan—the ancient Yi script is indigenous, exhibiting no direct borrowing or imitation of Chinese characters. The standardized script, akin to the Latinization of Chinese (e.g., Pinyin), represents a deliberate phonetic adaptation of traditional Yi writing.<sup>25</sup>

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. This interregional consistency prompts critical inquiry into whether it shares a direct genealogical lineage with Dongyi civilization or a proto-Dongyi script.

According to mainstream academic consensus from international conferences, ancient Yi script spans 8,000 to 10,000 years, potentially originating in the late Paleolithic era, proximate to the legendary Fuxi epoch, and evolving through the Yellow Emperor-Cangjie period before culminating in the Shang Dynasty oracle bone script. This timeline suggests it may represent a proto-logographic precursor to early Chinese characters, serving as a foundational stratum for Shang writing systems. In contrast, modern Yi script—like Khitan, Tangut, Phags-pa, Hangul, and Japanese kana—is



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.”

a phonetic adaptation derived from Latin-based orthographic reforms. Strictly speaking, “ancient Yi script” is neither equivalent to modern Yi script nor reducible to a monolithic “Yi script” category. Epigraphic evidence aligns it more closely with *Cangjie’s Script* (《倉頡書》) and *Xia Yu’s Script* (《夏禹書》), suggesting it functioned as a primary script form during the Three Sovereigns period (三皇時代) among the Qiang people (羌人) bearing the Jiang (薑) and Qiang (羌) clan names. 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. Thus, tentatively designating it as “pr oto-Cangjie script” (古倉頡文) bridges the evolutionary gap between Neolithic symbolic systems and mature Shang oracle bone script.

In *The Origin of Chinese Characters is a Mystery*, Li Ling notes that contemporary studies on the genesis of Chinese writing increasingly draw parallels with ancient scripts such as Sumerian cuneiform, Egyptian hieroglyphs, and Mayan glyphs, employing comparative methodologies to trace developmental pathways. For instance, Sumerian cuneiform evolved through four stages: pottery marks, clay tokens, proto-cuneiform, and mature cuneiform. This evolutionary model transcends the limitations of earlier “definitive origin” or “sudden emergence” theories, leading scholars to conclude that the oracle bone script of Yinxu must have undergone a preparatory phase.<sup>26</sup>

Regarding the duration of this phase, estimates vary. Chen Mengjia proposed a minimum of 500 years, dating back to around 1700 BCE.<sup>27</sup> However, empirical research suggests a far more protracted preparatory process, within which ancient Yi script, termed “proto-Cangjie script” (古倉頡文), emerged as a critical transi-tional link. Remarkably preserved in its primal form, this script represents one of the most pivotal continuities bridging pre-linguistic symbolism and mature logographic systems.

Now, to find conclusive evidence of early writing, we must reverse-engineer from known writing systems—in Rao Zongyi’s words, “use later evidence to infer earlier forms.” Reviewing prehistoric symbols in China, those from the Jiahu site (c. 6000 BCE), though the earliest in chronology, remain controversial as to whether they constitute proto-writing. Symbols from the Banpo site (c. 4500 BCE) were classified by Qiu Xigui as “Category A symbols,” while those from the Dawenkou site (c. 2700–2500 BCE) were classified as “Category B symbols.” Guo Moruo argued that Category A symbols predated Category B and represented the earliest writing, but Qiu



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

Xigui held the opposite view, asserting that Category A symbols did not meet the definition of writing, whereas Category B symbols, capable of recording names and objects, were closer to true writing. In 1978, Qiu initially interpreted Dawenkou pottery symbols as clan emblems akin to Shang dynasty lineage markers, but later revised his stance in 1989 and 1993, concluding that neither category constituted actual writing. He proposed that Chinese characters formed a complete system around the Xia-Shang transition (mid-3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE, c. 2500 BCE), with Category B symbols serving as the upper limit for proto-writing and mature writing emerging thereafter<sup>28</sup>. 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 script<sup>29</sup>. 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. This should involve an in-depth exploration of the “ancient Yi script” - known as the “ancient Cangjie script” or “Xia-Yu script” - to seek more compelling evidence that verifies their genealogical connections. Concurrently, there is an urgent need for academia to conduct extensive and profound collaborative research encompassing multiple disciplines such as paleography, oracle bone studies, archaeology, historiography, and classical textual studies. Should this interdisciplinary effort yield relatively reasonable and conclusive research outcomes, it will undoubtedly inaugurate a new chapter in the study of Yinxu Oracle Bone Script and ancient writing systems, thereby facilitating the unveiling of the mystery surrounding the origins of Chinese writing.

### 3.2 Exploring the Origins of the “Sheep” Character and the Three Sovereigns Era through the Sanxingdui Bronze Sheep Zun

In tracing the origins of Huaxia civilization, the “Three Sovereigns” (Fuxi, Nüwa, and Shennong) recorded in Records of the *Grand Historian* (Shiji) mark the prologue of early civilization, followed by the era of the “Five Emperors” led by the Yellow Emperor. Examining the Sheep Zun vessel displayed at the Sanxingdui Museum, along with the Four-Goat Square Zun housed in the Hunan Provincial Museum and the National Museum of China, these precious artifacts silently reveal that sheep likely held crucial significance as totemic symbols during the Three Sovereigns Era. From the Yellow Emperor onward, the ethnic totem gradually evolved, with the dragon totem emerging as dominant. This shift culminated in the culturally monumental event of “Cangjie, the historian of the Yellow Emperor, creating Chinese characters.” By the Shang Dynasty, the evolution of decorative motifs on bronze vessels clearly shows sheep patterns being replaced by kuilong (serpentine dragons) and kuifeng (phoenix-like creatures), serving as material evidence of changing eras and totemic transformation. However, in modern cultural discourse, the widely recognized identity of “Descendants of the Dragon” has partially obscured the preceding 5,000-year history where sheep served as a prominent cultural emblem for the Huaxia people. Thus,



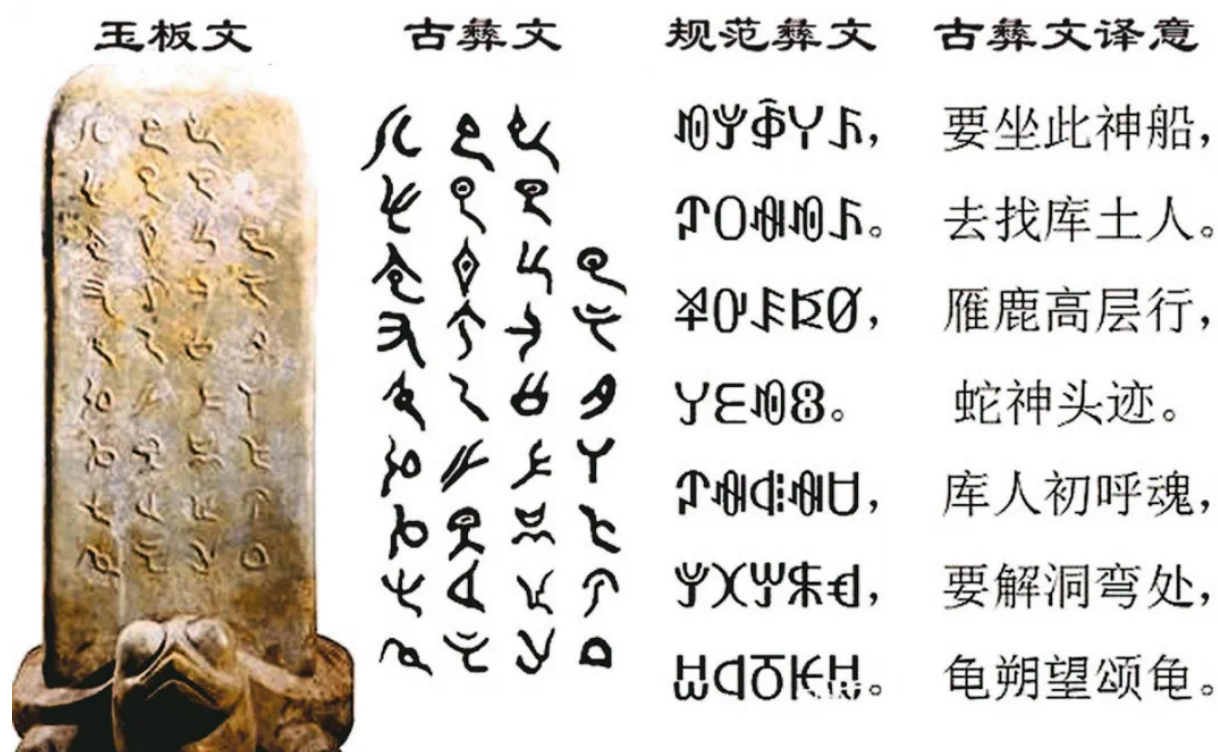


Figure 17. Ancient Yi Script Stele in White Marble, Collection of Liangshan Autonomous Prefecture. Chen Mengjia, *A Comprehensive Study of the Oracle Bone Inscriptions from Yinxu - Geography of States*: Example given - Fu Hao was the queen of Wu Ding, the 23rd king of the Shang dynasty. Oracle bone recording her leading an army of thirteen thousand to campaign against the Qiangfang tribe in the west: "On the day Xinsi, divined: Enroll Fu Hao with three thousand [troops], enroll ten thousand, call to attack (Qiang)."

investigating the value system of the "sheep" character within the Chinese script becomes particularly urgent.

From the perspective of textual archaeology, the character for "sheep" (羊) appears in both Oracle Bone Script and Shang Dynasty bronze inscriptions. Tracing the evolution of the "sheep" character reveals its profound connection to the lives of ancient ancestors. Sheep embodied art, nurtured culture, symbolized spirituality, and accompanied the Chinese nation from primal wilderness to civilization. Sheep influenced China's writing system, cuisine, morality, rituals, and nearly every facet of life.

Focusing on the structural composition of characters related to "sheep" (羊), numerous cultural codes lie hidden within. The character "Qiang" (羌, figure 18) in Oracle Bone Script is intricately linked to the evolution of the "sheep" character. In Shang Dynasty Oracle Bone Script and bronze inscriptions, the "Qiang" character derived from "sheep" (羊) exhibits remarkable complexity, with over 200 documented variations. Delving into classical texts, *Shuowen Jiezi* (Analytical Dictionary of Characters) offers a profound interpretation: "羊 (sheep) signifies 祥

(auspiciousness)." Dong Zhongshu, a prominent Confucian scholar of the Western Han Dynasty, further asserted: "Sheep symbolize auspiciousness, hence their use in rituals of good fortune." Due to their docile and amiable nature, sheep were revered by ancient ancestors as embodiments of benevolence and righteousness, deeply embedded within early cultural belief systems. The ethnonym "Qiang" (羌), referring to pastoral communities whose livelihoods centered on sheep, originates linguistically from the "sheep" (羊) character—a textual lineage that vividly underscores the inseparable bond between ancient Qiang people and sheep. Moreover, many Chinese characters imbued with auspicious meanings, such as 祥 (auspiciousness), 美 (beauty), 善 (goodness), and 義 (a component of Fuxi's name), draw their semantic essence from the "sheep" (羊) character, further cementing sheep's pivotal role in the cultural framework of early Huaxia civilization.

Turning to the Bronze Sheep Zun unearthed at the Sanxingdui site and the Four-Goat Square Zun discovered at the Tanheli site in Ningxiang, Hunan, these exquisite bronze artifacts serve as tangible evidence of sheep totem worship during the Three Sovereigns Era,

bearing immeasurable historical and cultural value. Their elegant forms and masterful craftsmanship depict sheep totems in majestic poses—heads held high or resting peacefully—vividly resurrecting the sacred status of sheep in ancient hearts and reanimating the grandeur of sheep totem veneration from the Three Sovereigns Era for modern observers.

A thorough investigation into the ancestral origins of Fuxi and Emperor Yan Shennong from the Three Sovereigns Era reveals that their surnames and ethnic affiliations are deeply culturally connected to the character for “sheep” (羊).

For Fuxi, analyzing the structure of the character “羲” (Xi) in his name. From a phonetic-semantic perspective, it combines the semantic component “兮” (xi, an archaic particle denoting breath) with the phonetic component “義” (yì, “righteousness”), originally meaning “vital energy.” Interpreted ideographically (based on clerical script forms), it comprises 羊 (sheep), 禾 戈 (he-ge, combining “grain” and “dagger-axe”), and 丂 (kǎo, “to verify”). Here, 羊 (sheep) signifies not only the animal but also extends to “sheep following humans” or “sheep obeying human will.” This suggests Fuxi likely served as a shepherd-leader in ancient times, guiding pastoral communities with leadership to seek fertile habitats. The ancient Qiang people, reliant on sheep herding, represent one of the earliest foundations of the Chinese nation. The character “羌” (Qiang), derived from “羊” (sheep), embodies the Qiang people’s ancestral memory and cultural heritage.

Regarding the research of Fuxi’s birthplace, Professor Zhao Kuifu, a doctoral supervisor and leading scholar at Northwest Normal University, dedicated extensive research to Qiuchi Mountain in Xihe County, Gansu Province, proposing compelling arguments. First, according to the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*’ detailed geographical descriptions of “Mount Changyang” (常羊之山), its orientation, mountain ranges, surrounding water systems, and relative positions to other landmarks align precisely with Qiuchi Mountain. Second, legend states that Youjiao’s daughter, Nüding, encountered a divine dragon at Mount Changyang in Huayang. Historically, Qiuchi Mountain was located within the ancient Huayang territory, linking the myth to its geographical context. Thus, Mount Changyang in the legend is conclusively identified as Qiuchi Mountain. Third, Qiuchi Mountain was anciently called Qiu yi Mountain (仇夷山). The phonetic similarities between “Qiuchi” (仇池), “Qiu yi” (仇夷), and “Changyang” (常羊) provide strong phonological evidence for their equivalence<sup>30</sup>. Ascending Qiuchi Mountain’s summit via the Jiudaquan winding path reveals a lush plateau

with 99 natural springs and rice cultivation. A decade ago, two additional springs were discovered here. As Fuxi’s purported birthplace, this oasis-like terrain stands uniquely within the Longyuan region. When the China Millennium Monument was built in Beijing in 2000, a delegation was specifically sent here to collect soil for its foundation, underscoring the site’s esteemed historical status.

Regarding Emperor Yan Shennong of the Three Sovereigns, *Di Wang Shi Ji* (Records of Emperors and Kings) states: “Shennong’s clan bore the surname Jiang (薑). His mother, Ren Si, was a daughter of the Youjiao clan named Nüding, consort to Shaodian. She wandered to Huayang, where she encountered a divine dragon’s head, and thus conceived Emperor Yan.” Examining the Oracle Bone Script character for “Jiang” (薑), its structure depicts a sheep above a woman or resembles a woman wearing sheep horns. Bronze script variants retain this style, portraying women adorned with sheep-head ornaments. The Oracle Bone Script form directly reflects the veneration of sheep in ancient matrilineal societies, where such adornments symbolized tribal worship.

In Oracle Bone Script, the distinction between “Qiang” (羌) and “Jiang” (薑) lies in gender: “Qiang” denotes male Qiang people, while “Jiang” denotes female Qiang people. This suggests the Qiang tribe predated the emergence of the Jiang surname. Both the Qiang tribe and the Jiang surname carried forward sheep totem worship, manifested in wearing sheep horns to proclaim kinship with the animal. Notably, when Shennong’s Emperor Yan transitioning from the Jiang surname to the patrilineal Qiang identity, he inherited the cultural legacy of Fuxi’s “divine dragon-head” era.

*Shuowen Jiezi* (Analytical Dictionary of Characters, Vol. 12) notes: “Jiang originated from Shennong’s residence by the Jiang River, adopted as a surname. It combines ‘woman’ (女) with ‘sheep’ (羊) as a phonetic.” Wang Yun’s *Shuowen Jiezi Ju Du* (Commentary) adds: “Emperor Yan is Shennong. ‘Emperor Yan’ is his title; ‘Shennong’ is his epithet.” This era remained rooted in the ancient Qiang cultural framework, where sheep symbolized auspiciousness, beauty, and virtue.

As for the Dongyi people and Yi people, current research posits their rise occurred later, after the Five Emperors (descendants of the divine dragon lineage) or post-Yu’s Xia Dynasty, during the Shang-Zhou periods. This partly explains why Dongyi scripts from regions like Shandong can be deciphered using the “ancient Yi script” (古彝文), also termed “Cangjie script” (倉頡文).

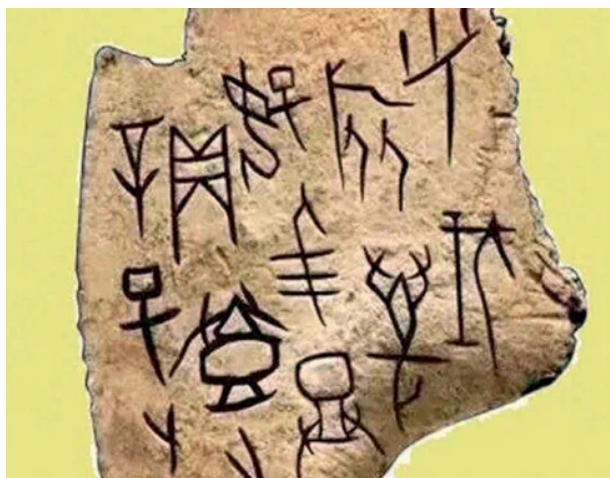


Figure 18. Oracle bone concerning Fu Hao's campaign against the Qiangfang tribe. Chen Mengjia, *A Comprehensive Study of the Oracle Bone Inscriptions from Yinxu - Geography of States*: Example given - Fu Hao was the queen of Wu Ding, the 23<sup>rd</sup> king of the Shang dynasty. Oracle bone recording her leading an army of thirteen thousand to campaign against the Qiangfang tribe in the west: "On the day Xinsi, divined: Enroll Fu Hao with three thousand [troops], enroll ten thousand, call to attack (Qiang)."

### 3.3 The Relationship Between the Qiang and Yi: Tracing the Cultural Threads of Peripheral Ethnic Groups in Huaxia Civilization

In retracing the early trajectory of Huaxia civilization, the Three Sovereigns Era—marked by sheep totemism—holds profound significance. During this period, the Jiang and Qiang surname clans flourished, with Qiang ethnic group, as a pivotal branch of the Hua ethnic core, deeply integrated into the mainstream of antiquity and instrumental in shaping early Huaxia civilization. Subsequently, the Yi people, situated on the periphery of Huaxia, gradually entered historical prominence, their cultural fusion with the Di-Qiang ethnic groups leaving indelible imprints from the Shang Dynasty onward.

From the perspective of cultural inheritance, as ancient Qiang languages matured alongside the development of the "ancient Cangjie script" (古倉頡文) and "Xia-Yu script" (夏禹文), the Yi people adeptly utilized this writing system to establish roots in the southwestern frontier regions of present-day Sichuan, Guizhou, Yunnan, and Tibet. These peripheral zones of Huaxia became fertile ground for Yi cultural preservation. Through ancient scripts, they recorded their ethnic literature, poetry, and artistic treasures, ensuring their transmission to the present day. The cultural legacy borne by the "ancient Yi script"—"ancient Cangjie script"—resembles an untapped intellectual reservoir, harboring the nascent memories of the Chinese nation and demanding rigorous scholarly excavation.

Examining textual archaeology, the appearance of the characters “夷” (Yi) and “彝” (Yi) in Shang Dynasty Oracle Bone Script attests to the enduring cultural innovations of the Qiang, Yi, and related ethnic groups, showcasing their struggles and triumphs in forging cultural distinction. Chronologically, current research indicates the Qiang preceded the Yi in ethnic development. If the earlier hypothesis—that the “ancient Yi script may equate to ancient Qiang script, synonymous with the ‘ancient Cangjie script’ and ‘Xia-Yu texts’”—holds validity, then the “ancient Yi script”—“ancient Cangjie script” never vanished. Its origins trace back to the late Paleolithic and early Neolithic periods, beginning with Fuxi's creation of hexagrams and knotted-cord records, evolving through Emperor Yan's era, transformed by the “Cangjie character creation” during the Yellow Emperor's reign, and culminating in the mature Oracle Bone Script of the Shang Dynasty, thereby cementing the foundation of the Huaxia writing system.

Within contemporary academia, a consensus has coalesced regarding the origins of the Yi people. Mainstream scholarship posits a northern origin for the Yi, synthesized from Chinese historical records and Yi ethnic sources, which affirm their ancestral ties to ancient Qiang peoples of the western regions. The Yi are primarily descended from the Di-Qiang ethnic groups amalgamation—a fusion of Di-Qiang groups and proto-Yi populations. From the perspective of Chinese writing system origins, the author proposes a bold hypothesis: the Yi people continuously used the “ancient Yi script” (古彝文), equated with the “ancient Cangjie script” (古倉頡文), awaiting interdisciplinary verification.

Approximately two millennia ago, Yi society reached a pivotal transition into patrilineal clan structures. According to ancient Yi script texts, their ancestor Zhong Muyu fathered six sons—known as the “Six Patriarchs” (六祖: Wu, Zha, Bu, Mo, Nuo, Heng)—who became progenitors of the Yi's six branches. These early legends and poetic records, preserved in ancient texts, inherit the cultural embers of Fuxi-era Huaxia civilization and originate from the historical, literary, and rhythmic traditions of the ancient Qiang. Like constellations tracing a unified East Asian civilizational genesis, they illuminate a coherent lineage. Thus, the Yan-Huang or Huaxia civilization, documented through East Asian logographic characters, increasingly aligns with the hypothesis of a single-origin cradle for human civilization.



#### 4. Conclusion

To solidify this theoretical framework, it is imperative to conduct in-depth explorations of the currently prominent Ba-Shu civilization and Dongyi civilization, focusing on two critical issues:

First, the Origin of Mature Oracle Bone Script. Following the historical logic, can the textual evolution trajectory of the Three Sovereigns and Five Emperors—particularly the Xia cultural era—as recorded in Chinese characters in texts like *Records of the Grand Historian* (Shiji), be authentically deciphered through rigorous interdisciplinary studies of the ancient Yi script, Dongyi civilization, and Ba-Shu civilization? This demands that academia broaden its research scope on ancient Yi script literature, distinguishing its distinctions from the Yan-Huang civilization while precisely identifying potential commonalities. Through comparative analysis, a comprehensive panorama of the origin and development of the Huaxia writing system may be delineated.

Second, concerning the alleged connection between the ancient Yi script and Western civilizations. In recent years, some Chinese scholars and writers have proposed numerous assertions about the “ancient Yi script,” often bordering on exaggeration. Under such circumstances, can rigorous, multi-disciplinary collaboration—spanning modern archaeology, anthropology, paleography, linguistics, and historiography—produce credible, scrutiny-proof academic findings? 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 scripts<sup>31</sup>. 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.<sup>32</sup> 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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Editor: Wang Jing

#### ENDNOTES

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## 從文字起源洞察中華文明的原生性

劉正成

**摘要：**炎黃文化作為中華文明同一起源的兩大支柱體系，意義深遠。借助對豐富的現代考古學資料中文字刻劃符號的深入探究，可清晰發現，《史記》所記載的、以炎帝為引領的長江流域江海文明，以及以黃帝為核心的黃河流域內陸文明，是融匯形成殷商甲骨文為成熟漢字的兩個子系統。其中，仰韶文字元號隸屬於內陸系統；而三星堆與東夷文字元號則緊密關聯于江海系統，它們彼此之間血脈相連，在漫長歲月裡經歷融合發展，彰顯出表意特徵成熟漢字的深厚淵源、曲折融合歷程以及難能可貴的原生性特質。這種原生性與以表音為顯著特徵的西亞北非古文字系統形成鮮明對照，且中華文明憑藉自身文字發展脈絡，同樣承載著悠久歷史，熠熠生輝。

**關鍵詞：**東亞文明原生性；炎黃文化；漢字起源；三星堆；羊圖騰；古羌文與古彝文；甲骨文