

RULES OF CONDUCT AT A CROSSROADS



FOUNDATION ONE
HEAVEN IS ROUND

Heaven is Round

- a Chinese theory of cyclical change -

Cover

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Acknowledgements

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F1: Rules of Conduct at a Crossroads

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Foundation Series – Guidance Notes

I write as a storyteller; I am not a historian. To keep the story flowing and light-hearted, sources are acknowledged in the Notes at the end.

- If you are reading on a device, hover over the number at the end of a paragraph and its requisite note will pop up.
- Online sources are linked and underlined. Images are linked and licensed under Creative Commons unless another source is given.
- A cross-referencing system connects themes across different articles: e.g. Foundation Series, Issue Two, page 7 is abbreviated to (F2, 7).
- Characters and tone marks are included as a footnote or an illustration when a word or phrase is first used. ‘Ancient’ refers to characters on oracle bones or bronze vessels (c. 1250 – 770 BC). Check the [Audio Guide](#) on the website or the F1 appendix (F1, 18 - 21) for more details.
- Apart from this issue, I do not analyse characters. To learn more about their origins and meanings, try [Wiktionary](#) or the extensive databases of the [Chinese University of Hong Kong](#) or the [National Taiwan University](#).

Early Chinese dynasties

The Foundation series is set in the timeline below, except for Foundation Two which is set in the late Ming dynasty (1368 – 1644).

Xia	c. 2070 - 1600		
Shang	c. 1600 – 1046 BC		
Zhou	c. 1046 – 256 BC	Western Zhou Eastern Zhou	c. 1046 – 771 BC 771 – 256 BC Spring & Autumn 771 – 481 BC Warring States 481 - 221 BC
Qin	221 – 206 BC		
Han	206 BC – 220	Western Han Eastern Han	202 BC – 9 25 – 220
Xin	9 – 23		

Xià 夏 Shāng 商 Zhōu 周 Qín 秦 Hàn 漢 Xīn 新

Introduction

Wuxing suffers from a surfeit of translations: five phases, agents, forces, processes, elements and more besides. Since the five components of the theory are called Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal and Water, any choice of translation begs the question of what they are understood to be. That changed over time (c. 4th - 1st centuries BC) from raw natural resources to rarefied cosmic powers. Different translations have been proposed to reflect various stages of the theory's development. As a result, there is no translation which works in all contexts.

Indeed, perhaps for this reason, the latest trend seems to be no translation at all. Just use *wuxing*! After all, its cosmological cousin, *yin-yang* has not suffered the indignity of dubious translations which have stuck to it like barnacles to a shipwreck. I prefer to use *wuxing* for the traditional theory and the five phases for the new perspectives, but the conundrum of which translation to choose led me to explore the myriad meanings of the word, *xing*.

Wu means five. Nice and simple. Does *xing* mean phase, agent, element, process, or force? Not really. It does mean to process but as a ritual act of walking, a procession, rather than the natural processes by which trees grow or ores form. As with other Chinese characters, the meaning of *xing* varies according to context: it can mean to take a step, to go, to walk, to proceed, to travel or circulate. *Xing* also implies how you behave or carry out a series of actions in the sense of a procedure. As a noun, *xing* can mean a road, line, row, column, or rank.

When these meanings are juxtaposed, the emerging picture is of action within a greater order. A grand dance of cosmic harmony? The myriad goings and doings of life on earth are all perfectly synchronised. That's the gist of the traditional theory. Or restrictive social conduct? Step out of line and you'll be acting out of order.

wǔxíng 五行

yīn-yáng 陰陽

行 is also pronounced as *háng*, but since the theory is called *wuxing*, I'll use *xing* throughout. For examples of *hang*, see p.9 of this issue.

RULES OF CONDUCT AT A CROSSROADS

Unearthing the Oracle Bones

In the late 19th century, near the city of Anyang in Henan Province, farmers kept finding old bones in their fields. They sold them to pharmacists who ground them into powder to use in remedies. These 'dragon bones' were thought to be fossils with medicinal powers, a long established tradition in Chinese medicine. I guess it would be like being prescribed dinosaur bone as a cure for osteoporosis.



In 1899 the bones caught the eye of Wang Yirong, a director of the Imperial Academy - the traditional seat of learning for all aspiring young civil servants. The story goes that he needed medicine for a fever. The pharmacy provided a packet of dragon bones, ready to be ground, when he and a friend noticed some markings on the bones that looked uncannily like inscriptions on antique bronze vessels.¹

The bones were in fact just over three thousand years old, hardly worthy of the status of a Jurassic fossil. Altogether more potent than a medicinal brew, however, the bones were the first hard evidence of the fabled Shang dynasty that had long been relegated to the archaeological league tables of 'mere legend'. Furthermore, the markings on the bones turned out to be the earliest known source of Chinese writing.²

After being intensively studied they were renamed 'oracle bones' because their original purpose had been for divination. Flat wide bones and shells such as shoulder blades of cattle or plastrons (underbelly) of turtles had been used as writing tablets. Red hot poker were inserted into holes in the bones until they cracked. The piercing sound was not the squeals of animal spirits decrying endless human exploitation. It was a communiqué from the royal ancestors of the Shang king. The sound of the crack and its resulting pattern across the bone or shell was their response. Divination was used to ensure that the king's plans, say, to do battle or conduct a sacrifice, would accord with the wishes of his deceased superiors. In this way, the forces of fortune would be with him. The outcome of this sacred communion between the living and the dead was duly inscribed onto the bone itself.³

It is a strange twist of fate that one of China's earliest dynasties, the Shang, was unearthed while its last, the Qing (1644 – 1912) crumbled amid internal political tensions that were further exacerbated by the looming presence of foreign powers. The last emperor of China, Puyi, was a mere six years old at the time of his abdication in 1912 just as the magnitude of the oracle bones' role in history was becoming apparent. The Imperial Academy closed its doors in 1905 after centuries of service.

Ānyáng 安陽

Wáng Yiróng 王懿榮 1845 – 1900

Hénán Province 河南省

Pǔyí 溥儀 1906 – 1967

Qīng dynasty 清朝

While Puyi was divested of his robes as China's last Son of Heaven scholars and antique dealers scrambled to acquire these souvenirs of ancient China. Would the prescient powers of the bones and shells lend weight to China's determination to remain a sovereign state? Or would these priceless remains of antiquity be carved up as spoils alongside the country itself? As for Wáng Yiróng, he became caught up in the Boxer Rebellion, an anti-western anti-colonial uprising. When an international force occupied Beijing, he and his family took their own lives.

Graphic Origins of *Xing*

Both *wu* and *xing* appear on the oracle bones but not together as *wuxing*; the theory took another thousand years to unfold. *Wu* was a diagonal cross between two horizontal lines.

The word, *xing* was drawn as a crossroads. The crossroads image reflected the thoroughfares of Shang settlements. How many depended on the size of the settlement, but let's assume there would have been at least two: one running north to south and the other running east to west.

xing - to go, to walk, a road,



ancient

modern

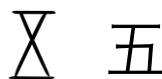
The crossroads is a visual mnemonic; *xing* did not mean a crossroads, but its variety of meanings do cluster around the idea of a junction. For example, *xing* means to go, to walk or to proceed.

In Shang settlements, people travelling

along these thoroughfares would have been going about their daily business with animals, goods, and carts in tow. If a pig escaped its tether, however, and ran off upsetting other people's apple carts the trail of trotters leading to the tearaway hog would have been all over the place. In other words, it is all very well to envisage an orderly pathway along which to proceed, but complications can set in as soon as you set off. Especially when you reach a crossroads.

Divination is used to ascertain when, how, or whether to proceed. The Shang royal ancestors, whose missives resounded from the cracked shells of turtles, judged whether the king's plans should go ahead or not.

wǔ - five



ancient

modern

The ancestors had the power to clear an otherworldly pathway for his worldly endeavours like the Red Sea parting for Moses. Ensuring that a course of action proceeds smoothly entails not only deciding when to act but also how to act – your conduct. The *Yijing* (Book of Changes) has counsel on attitude as well as action.

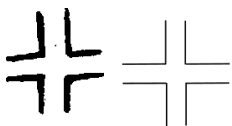
Your behaviour or conduct is another meaning of *xing*. Conduct can imply how you carry yourself—your gait, manner, posture—as well as how you carry out an action such as conducting a ritual sacrifice.

Implicit is the impact of your conduct upon others, such as people you pass on the street. If the pig owner set off too hastily and did not secure his boar, perhaps he was culpable for the chaos. If the fruit cart was heavily laden and a few ripe pickings fell off, inducing the pig to pull away, maybe the cart owner must accept some responsibility. Standing at the crossroads of two lines of intent how do both parties proceed? This question is an extrapolation of *xing*, not a direct meaning, but once you take a step or initiate an action, sooner or later, you will cross paths with a person or a pig doing likewise.

As well as people travelling with their animals, goods and carts in tow, soldiers would have also proceeded along the thoroughfares. The Shang armies were a fearsome military might in northern China. Many settlements would have also doubled up as garrisons, military outposts, as the Shang endeavoured to expand their hold on resource-rich lands. As the soldiers headed out of a settlement to do battle they may have proceeded in formation – in rank order. Perhaps they returned later, suffering from battle fatigue, but hopefully with sufficient honour to still hold their heads up high: to maintain a dignified gait as noble warriors.

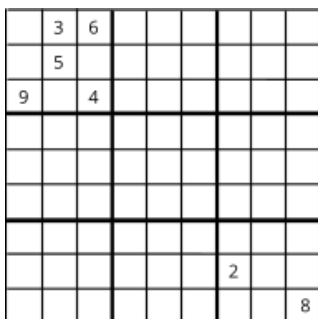
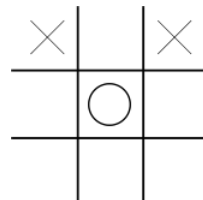
Therefore, although *xing* means to go, to walk, to proceed, there is an emphasis on a group of people walking in a procession. Who walks in front; who is in the centre; who shores up the rear; who flanks either side as well as their attire and insignia signify their rank order. Picture a modern military display with all its attendant pomp and circumstance. Lines and rows of soldiers march with a specific gait; it is not like normal walking. A ruler presides over the display to demonstrate his supreme authority. Hence, used as a noun, *xing* means a line, row, column or rank.

Order should prevail as long as everybody acts in line with their rank. Until a pig escapes its tether and ruins the rank order among humans.⁴



A grid of vertical lines and horizontal rows form a grid. The basic unit is a cross: one vertical line intersects one horizontal row.

Let's shift to a two-dimensional focus and place the cross on a piece of paper like a Noughts and Crosses game. Two vertical lines and two horizontal rows create the nine squares of your game, which will be filled with strategically placed noughts and crosses.



Another useful image is the nine-by-nine grid of a [Sudoku game](#) which has eighty-one squares. However, a grid can expand indefinitely. A modern use of the word, *xing*, is the cells of data in a spreadsheet. Add extra columns and rows as your business ledger becomes more complex.

Columns and rows are also the grid structure for Chinese writing, which is different to the standard western system. We start in the top left hand corner, write horizontally across the page, and then start a new row below the first one. Whereas Chinese writing starts in the top right hand corner, characters are written vertically to the bottom of the page, followed by a new column to the left of the first one. Practice

books have a grid structure like graph paper. You practise writing one character per square until you learn to write in neat lines and rows. Out of interest, when I asked a Japanese friend what she understood by *wuxing* (the pronunciation is different in Japanese), she said, "It means five lines of text." She was a museum curator after all!

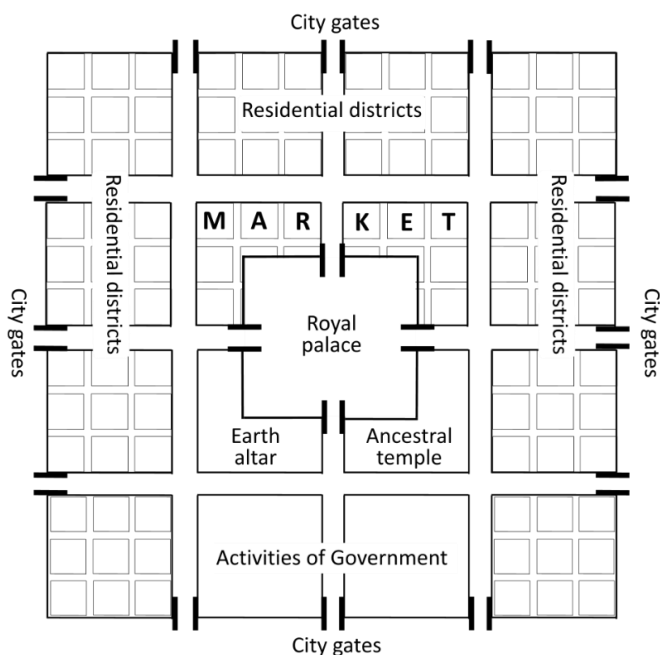
衙	衙	衙
衝	街	衍
衢	術	術

Keep an eye out for these characters!

Returning to three dimensions, a traditional cosmological image is a round heaven and square earth, and the earth was partitioned as a grid, for example of nine squares. A central inner square and eight outer squares for the cardinal and intercardinal directions. The spherical shape of our planet was not obvious to ancient eyes, but modern maps still have grid lines: longitudinal is north to south and latitudinal is east to west.⁵

NW	N	NE
W	Centre	E
SW	S	SE

Grids were also the basis of urban planning. While a city built in an exact square shape posed topographical challenges, grids suited the layout of districts. Below is an idealised city layout (c. 3rd century BC) with a royal palace, residential districts, government offices, market quarters, a temple for the ancestors and an altar to the earth. Every cell had its place in the cosmological scheme of things.⁶



Adapted from Piero Corradini, "Ancient China's 'Ming Tang' 明堂 Between Reality and Legend", *Rivista degli studi orientali*, **69** 1995, 175.

To take a step further with the meanings of *xing*, we are going to visit the market quarters of the city. However, before doing so, I want to explain how the image of the crossroads evolved into two graphs that form the modern character. A character is the written form of a spoken word. I use 'graph' to mean the components of a character (see p.18).

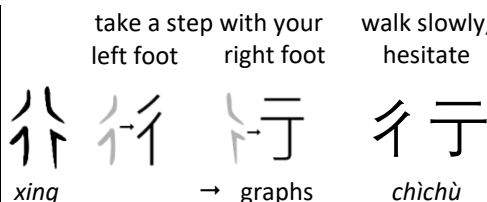


xing - development
c. 1250 → 200 BC ⁷

modern

As Chinese writing became more abstract over time, the left and right sides of the crossroads morphed into two graphs which means to step with your left and right foot

respectively. As mentioned, *xing* can imply marching soldiers: "Right, left, right, left, right, left". On a more hesitant note, the two graphs form a phrase, *chichu*, which means to walk slowly or unsteadily or to act in a tentative manner. You proceed falteringly as if the next step is neither easy nor clear. ⁸



dé

The left graph is found in various words, many of which imply action. For example, *de* can mean you have to do something: you have to go to the shop because you've run out of milk. It also means to get, obtain, or to receive.

The left graph of *xing* forms the left side of this character.

The left and right graphs of the crossroads are also prised apart when an extra graph is inserted to form a new word. On the oracle script, if the graph for a person is inserted this word meant to speak or to tell. Written next to the word for a king, the phrase meant 'the king speaks' or 'hail the king'. It is tempting to picture a person of senior rank blasting out orders from a megaphone at the juncture of two thoroughfares. Only a handful of characters have this structure (see p.5), and they are mainly archaic, but one is famous as we'll see in due course. ¹⁰

speech, tell ⁹

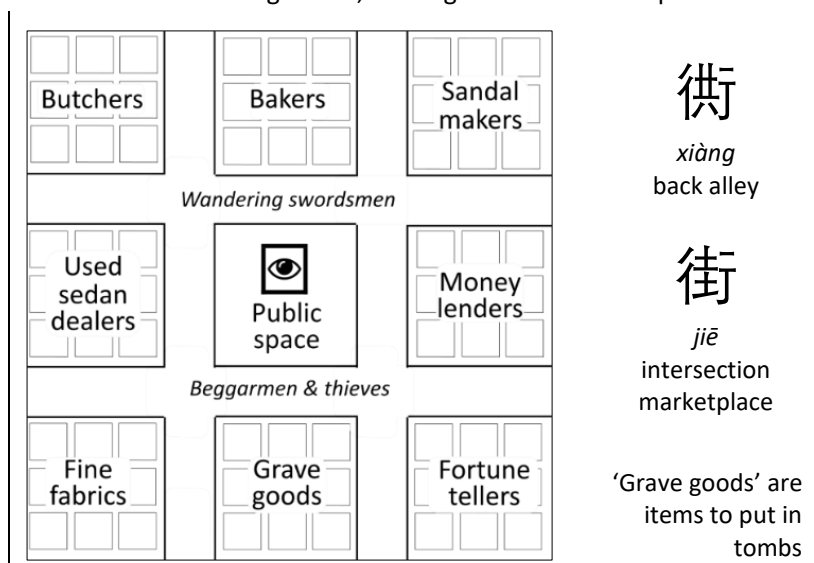


Goings and Doings of the Marketplace

Let's now perambulate around the city's market quarters. Some of the meanings of *xing* hark back to the activities of a marketplace. Markets had districts for different trades from fruit sellers to fortune tellers if your financial fortunes were not looking so peachy this year. Their stalls would have been laid out in lines and rows.¹¹

Markets attracted wandering swordsmen who were adept at cut-throat deals in back alleys, on the lookout for some ready cash working as extras in the latest action movie. Following a slight of honour our protagonist swings into action, leaping from roof to roof like an Iron Age practice of parkour. Deftly slicing a melon into pieces, she relishes a juicy bite while idly fending off four foes at once as they try to attack her from the front, behind, and either side.¹²

A central square was used for public spectacles, proclamations, rewards and punishments with live footage of gory dismemberments. A lofty central watchtower was fully stocked with officials who ensured that goods were bought and sold on agreed terms and palace coffers benefited. Perhaps they also eyed up a choice cut of their own? The districts below are imaginative, although there are some precedents.¹³



Stall holders not only displayed their wares, but also showed off their talents at carving meat, crafting grave goods, and telling fortunes. How much longer do you have to purchase your afterlife tomb ware?

銍

xuàn

*peddle your
wares, flaunt,
dazzle,
delude*

Xing can mean to carry out an action, but the implication is skilled execution. I don't mean beheadings in the central square, but any professional or technical skill - a 'line' of work.

A skill is a series of actions which are initially learnt in the same tentative manner as taking your first steps. Initial fumbling attempts are honed into a refined quality of craftsmanship which is so deft that an untrained eye cannot see the discrete steps of a sequence. Even if your line of work is to dismember criminals in the central square of the market, a certain flair is still on display. A modern colloquial use of *xing* is to tease a show-off.

術

shù

*specialist skill
craftsmanship
technique*

銀行
yínháng

Another modern use is in the words for a bank, industry, or trade. The circulation of money and goods is implied. Let's hope all financial transactions are accounted for in the neat lines and rows of a ledger, lest shady deals start taking place in the back alleys of book-keeping.

A famous modern crossroads is Tokyo's Shibuya Crossing. Thousands of vehicles and pedestrians traverse this crossing every day, the majority while carrying out their professions.

industry / trade

行業

hángyè

衝

chōng

*charge into,
butt, collide,
run against*
14

As for IKEA's marketplace you'll go through its one-way system, but you'll brook a great clash of the trolleys if you try to backtrack to find a kitchen gadget that you forgot to pick up.

Ideally, as long as everyone follows the same rules of conduct, there will be no collisions. Nevertheless, with all the marketplace bargaining, one line of intent can easily cross paths with another. Do the two parties cross swords? Does one back down and let the other pass? If they can go and do as they please, how does such interaction operate smoothly? Let's return to the theme of our conduct, our behaviour.

Moral conduct

A modern use of *xing* is to translate the phrase, 'OK'. If someone asks how you're doing you might reply, "I'm OK." Your life is proceeding well or at least not too badly. Another use is to agree to a plan of action. To say "OK" means that you think a plan is workable, you're happy to be involved, or you agree to what someone else intends to do. The phrase has the feel of buying into something: it is not OK to come home late without texting first or to overcharge for shoddy goods.

To go, to proceed, to act, to carry out with an underlying theme of direction and alignment: if your action is along the right lines then it is OK, you can go ahead. English idioms also make a link between action, direction, and socially appropriate behaviour: for example, toeing the line, going straight, back on track, on the right lines, or on the straight and narrow. Whereas inappropriate behaviour is described as speaking out of turn, acting out of order, or going off the rails.

In this sense we can bring in another activity of the marketplace: regulations, supervisory bodies, rewards and punishments. Each family, club, professional body, religious order, or country has a set of rules for how to behave. Some rules are explicit; others are implicit. Let's say all the artisans working in the same quarters of a market agree on a code of conduct like a medieval guild. If your actions fall out of alignment with those codes you can be accused of professional misconduct, anti-social behaviour, disloyalty, letting the side down, or even heresy. Picture a climbing plant tied to a lattice: you can grow in and out of the lattice but if you grow too many offshoots, you are likely to get pruned. Rules are the lattice, the social grid along which we are each expected to move and act. If your actions go out of step with the rules or you do something out of order in relation to the codes of your club, clan, or country, you could be teased, ostracised, ignored, fined, imprisoned, executed, or greatly revered as an innovative pioneer who forges new pathways.

Criminals have their freedom of movement and social interaction curtailed. They are confined or dismembered. Henceforth they must toe the line and that line can be pretty narrow, especially if their toes have been removed. Someone has to decide, according to law or established

customs, how an offender should be punished. In order to ensure a fair decision, the scruples of those passing judgement are paramount.

Ironically, there was another *wuxing* in circulation in early China, although it had no ostensible link to its natural counterpart. The ‘five conducts’ are benevolence, righteousness, ritual propriety, wisdom and sagacity. They were qualities to be practised and honed by officials such as magistrates. Ideally, you are neither too lenient (benevolent) nor too harsh (righteousness) and you follow correct protocol (ritual propriety). If your judgements have wisdom and sagacity, they will reflect those of Heaven itself.¹⁶

衙	public office, magistrate's court ¹⁵
yá	

Marketplace dealings must have been among the cases judged: Mr Zhao's pig upset Mrs Li's overloaded apple cart at a busy junction last month, and both parties claim it was the other person's fault. Witnesses come forward.

Our moral heckles are however easily raised by any raw deal. An antenna for fairness affects all social exchanges. Marketplace haggling

衍	pleased, satisfied open, upfront, kàn frank, forthright
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needs to result in a satisfactory outcome for both sides if trade is going to continue. Sticking to your side of the bargain is key to your integrity in the eyes of others.

Back in Europe the moral connotation of conduct is dated to the early 18th century. Before then conduct implied safe passage. To arrive in good conduct meant that you had reached your destination without getting lost or attacked by highwaymen. In Latin, *conducere* means to lead or guide. A bus conductor ensures safe passage while watching out for misconduct. Music conductors use highly-skilled arm-waving to guide an orchestra through a passage of music. Air traffic controllers only wave their arms about when the stress is getting unbearable.

A leader's role is also to ensure safe passage. A master craftsman leads apprentices through the step-by-step sequence of learning a skill. A chief executive leads a business through the economic ups and downs of markets. If a leader fails to toe the line set out for their employees to follow, whether shoddy workmanship or dubious financial transactions, we can lose trust and begin to look elsewhere for guidance.

Leading the Way

One of the most evocative words of Chinese philosophy is *dao*, the Way. As in English the way is a path and knowhow – a way to do something. Both *xing* and *dao* thus mean to proceed along a path and a procedure as skilled action. The Way of Archery, Tea, Calligraphy, or even a surgical operation is learned slowly, one step at a time, until the finely crafted movements meld into a precision performance. Otherwise, the archery class may result in a casualty in the operating theatre.

There is a good reason why the two words are so closely related.

<i>dào - way</i>  <i>ancient modern</i>	The earliest written forms of <i>dao</i> have the graph of a head in the middle of the two sides of <i>xing</i> with a hand or foot sometimes added below. The word, <i>dao</i> is not found on the oracle bones, but it is thought to be an abbreviated version of the person in the centre of the crossroads (see p. 7).¹⁷
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Again, as in English, a head is not only a physical head but also the head of an organisation. When the graph for a hand is added *dao* becomes a verb - to lead or to guide. You follow the Way, the examples of action and

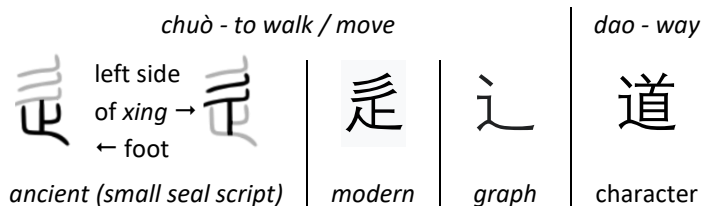
shǒu - a head - is depicted as an eye and eyebrow

 <i>ancient</i>	 <i>modern</i>
---	--

direction set out by your head.¹⁸ In Japanese, the graph for a head also means a neck. Your head turns to decide which way to go. Leaders need the flexibility to change course while keeping focused on overall goals. Blinkered leaders with stiff necks see only one direction. Dithering leaders look at all options but hesitate to decide which course of action to take. You could say their leadership style has an indecisive *chichu* manner. Both would struggle to lead the Way.¹⁹

As the character of *dao* morphed over time the graph for a head became the right side of the character and the left side of the crossroads (which also means to step with your left foot) joined with the graph for a foot to form the word, *chuo*, which means to walk or move. So, there is a head looking around—which way to go—and feet taking steps.

 <i>lead, guide, conduct</i> <i>dǎo</i>	direction set out by your head.¹⁸ In Japanese, the graph for a head also means a neck. Your head turns to decide which way to go. Leaders need the flexibility to change course while keeping focused
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In one of its many philosophical guises, *dao* became synonymous with the origins of the cosmos. If all phenomena share the same source there must be an underlying unity to all activity, no matter how diverse its manifestations. Even during an interaction such as buying and selling in the marketplace there are proper channels, let's call them the Way of Transactions, that lubricate the encounter so that one line of intent glides fluidly around another, like fish darting here and there, without brooking a great clash of the trolleys.²⁰

This ideal of harmonious interaction was extended to leadership. People would naturally flow or more precisely gravitate towards a ruler or teacher whose exemplary conduct elicits order without force. So long as you follow in their footsteps your conduct will be along the right lines. Existential dilemmas at the crossroads of life need not happen as these paragons of virtue have provided the signposts. As long as everyone stays on track there will be no accidents. The grid is set out, and it guides activity. All you have to do is follow the Way.

Yet the evocative ideal of a unified *dao* arose at a time of conflict in early China when ranks were being upended. Not only were there Warring States but also warring ideas and ideals whose proponents of course believed their Way was the correct one. They mocked the ways of rivals in order to gain the ear of rulers who were more interested in expedient ways and means (F1, 14 – 15).

The tension of different ways can lead to fraught exchanges, but it also stimulates novelty, new courses of action that no one person or party

衍

yǎn

*amplify,
develop,
overflow*

could have envisaged alone. If the graph for water is in the centre of *xing*, this word means to amplify, develop, evolve, overrun, or overflow. In short, going a step further or a step too far. Of course, the degree of amplification can run away with itself, like positive feedback on a sound system, but it can also result in a more complex level of order.

States adopted the successful methods of allies and enemies: new systems of social and economic organisation and military strategies. Roads and waterways enabled the circulation of armaments, goods and emissaries as well as ideas and ideals. It was along those routes that the theory of *wuxing* and its moral counterpart began to circulate.

Returning to the marketplace, the interplay of competition and cooperation can forge new paths. If a stall holder starts selling a popular new product the existing network of transactions may have to adjust to new channels of supply and demand. That is where things are flowing, everyone is heading to one stall not another; this stall holder is leading the Way, so to speak. As a result, the footfall of the market can shift its patterns, and if the change is enduring the whole market layout may need updating. Hence, action and the pathway along which action takes place can be mutually formative. There is neither wholly order, the grid is not fixed, nor wholly chaos, activity without pathways.

The same is true for regulations that guide the conduct of traders. In the modern-day marketplace some argue that supply and demand is most efficient when left to self-regulate. Too many rules, too rigid a grid, can hinder innovation and prop up less viable economic activity. That is until greed gets the better of scruples resulting in such eye-watering bailouts that the creed of minimal state intervention falls flat on its face. The danger of positive feedback is its negative consequences.

If there are no exorbitant profits, production will be well organised, expenditures will be properly controlled. Unless there is negligence there will be no failure. Therefore, it is said that the marketplace may know order or disorder, abundance or scarcity. However, it is incapable of bringing about abundance or scarcity on its own. There is a proper way to manage markets and production.* ²¹

Innovation implies risk and experiment while regulations evoke caution. Of course, rules and laws come out of lessons learnt, risks that backfired, but a far-sighted leader or legislator will promote innovative regulations, especially if it is greed that needs to be checked rather than risk itself.

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Wuxing developed as a guide to align human action within a vast grid of interaction which included the natural world, the course of the stars, and the ephemeral activities of spirits. Indeed, *xing* can also mean the orderly circular course of the stars. Harmony would prevail as long as human action toed the line, particularly the actions of a leader as well as the people in his charge. Otherwise, cosmic equilibrium could go awry. If the ladies of the palace wore the wrong-coloured silks for the season, all sorts of foreboding weather fronts would loom on the horizon. Using the logic of this venerable theory, we might deduce that climate change is caused by the fashion *faux pas* of celebrities at the premiere of their latest action movie.²²

Crossroads of Heaven
a celestial junction in

Scorpio

天衢

tiān qú

The fortune-teller sitting in a discreet corner of the marketplace divined how her clients could navigate safe passage through this vast cosmological grid. Avoiding accidents and traffic jams needed a psychic satnav: “In a hundred days turn right at the next crossroads of life to encounter good fortune. Oops, missed the turning, recalculating.” In order to weigh up one future probability against another, the ancient art of reading cracks on turtle shells has waned in favour of algorithms. Yet the quest to survive and thrive still holds us in thrall to what might happen, all the while keeping an eye out for the sunnier side of life. The path ahead maybe just a little too sunny.

Conclusion

I found this article interesting and enjoyable to put together. However, although I know more about what *xing* means, I am no further on about translating *wuxing* because there are all sorts of additional factors. The majority of meanings of *xing* clearly refer to human action. The original image was a crossroads, not two intertwining tree branches. Back to the initial point, then, any choice of translation begs the question of what Fire, Water, Wood, Metal and Earth are understood to be. I’ll summarise how different translations reflect the meanings of *xing* and stages of the theory’s development.

The earliest references to these five natural resources as a group were called *wucái*. *Cái* implies raw materials; hence, they were seen as vital resources for people's livelihoods. Of course, fire is not a material, it is a reaction, but if you don't know how to handle fire you will not be able to smelt metal. *Cái* also means an innate talent or ability – a natural gift. A master craftsman nurtures the raw talent of his apprentices, who in turn learn how to refine the innate properties of their materials. Clay, metal and timber are transformed into ceramics, weapons, and musical instruments echoing *xíng* as skilful action.²³

Translating *wuxíng* as the five processes was originally proposed as a reflection of the behavioural properties of these five 'materials'. As a craftsman you need to know that water will seep into a tiny fissure in your newly fired tea pot and render it useless for the Way of Tea. That is the conduct, the behaviour, of water as a liquid. The five processes is a versatile translation, but scholars have come to associate it with this particular brief of behavioural properties.²⁴

By the 3rd century BC, amid the burgeoning ideas of the Warring States, the five natural resources were transforming into cosmic powers. In the Overview, I mentioned how Earth, Wood, Metal, Fire and Water were believed to preside over dynastic eras. In this case, the passage refers to *wude*—five powers—but they are still presented in a sequence, an order, which is one meaning of *xíng*. The grid structure, especially the nine-square grid, is cosmologically linked to the cycles of *wuxíng*. I'll return to this point in Foundation Five.²⁵

The five agents as a translation was vogue in the '90s, but I have not seen this translation in recent literature. An agent is an entity which has intentions, makes decisions and perform actions. In other words, an agent is an actor and *xíng* means to act. Anything beyond human control must be controlled by something, so went the rational for ancient minds. From gods to ghosts, angles to ancestors, all sorts of ephemeral entities had the power, the agency, to influence the ups and downs of human life (F3, 30). Fire, Water, Wood, Metal and Earth were likewise seen as cosmic powers that sent forth omens; hence, the translation of the five agents.

The five phases as a translation is associated with a mature phase of the theory's development in which *yin-yang* and *wuxing* were seen as phases of *qi* that shaped celestial, terrestrial, and human activity. The five phases were still cosmic agents, but the emphasis is on their orderly progression: how water *qi* transforms into wood *qi* and governs fire *qi* (F2, 9 – 13).

Writing this article may have left me none the wiser about which translation best suits the theory of *wuxing*, but it has been helpful for the new perspectives. For example, I want to explore the role of agency in greater depth with a focus on human goings and doings. On the one hand we have more control over natural phenomena nowadays. Yet as our social infrastructures become more complex, ostensibly to meet human needs, paradoxically, we can feel less control of our lives. Mental health and political engagement are predicated on a sense of agency. Even star-studded celebrities can feel a lack of agency over their agents!

That is one theme to revisit. Another point that struck me while weaving together the myriad meanings of *xing* is how much they reflect the relationship between Wood and Metal. I say so in retrospect, as this idea only occurred to me after I had drafted the first version of this issue. Put simply, Metal is the grid and Wood is the activity around the grid. They shape each other in a constant cycle of action and consolidation.

In the phase of Wood we form intentions, make decisions, and carry out actions. Our sense of agency is strongest in the phase of Wood. We navigate safe passage from one place to another or from one point of our lives to another. Metal pertains to the lessons learnt, collective rules of conduct, the cumulative knowledge of a line of work and the impartial judgement of a magistrate. The negotiation of what is OK as acceptable behaviour or a workable plan reflects negotiations between Wood and Metal. Moral conduct is primarily a dialogue between Wood and Metal. For the relationship between them to work well, however, all the other phases need to be engaged. Otherwise, there'll be a stand-off. There is more to be said along these lines in due course. Meanwhile, Foundation Two is devoted to the most ubiquitous translation of *wuxing* – the five elements.

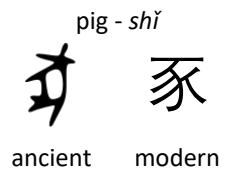
Appendix: Words within Words

This appendix is a simple guide to how Chinese characters developed. A *character*, in this context, will be the written form of a spoken Chinese word. A *graph* will be a component of a character.

Words are defined by having a sound and a meaning. Letters such as W, O, R, D, are components of words but most letters of the alphabet are just sounds. They have no meaning until they are strung together to make a WORD. Whereas the graphs of Chinese characters are words in their own right. Hence, the title: Words within Words.

Humans have been busy chatting away to each other since time immemorial, but the invention of writing is merely five thousand years old. It began in Mesopotamia, then in Egypt and China alongside the rise of states. Writing was initially used to make terse records of who owed what to whom (Mesopotamia) or which ancestor required what type of sacrifice and why (China). Epics were a later literary project.²⁶

Most early writing systems evolved out of drawing pictographs. If you want to write the spoken word, ‘cart’, then, draw a box on wheels. Drawing is a time-consuming activity, however, especially the engraving of hard surfaces like bones or shells. As Chinese writing adopted a wider remit than noting down ancestral consultations, the pictographs were abstracted into linear strokes that were easier and quicker to write. For example, on the oracle bones, the word for a pig resembles an animal. However, the graphic trail of trotters led to a set of lines which look more like the fat on a streaky bacon rasher.²⁷



While pictographs worked well for tangible objects like pigs and carts, abstract concepts were harder to depict this way. In preparation for a court hearing, if you needed to write: ‘Mr Zhao’s pig upset Mrs Li’s overloaded apple cart at a busy street junction last month, and both parties claim it was the other person’s fault’, all sorts of abstract words would also need visual representation let alone the claimants’ need for legal representation!

All early writing systems developed similar solutions to limit the potentially burgeoning number of visual mnemonics. First, pictographs of tangible objects such as plants and animals were used to write words

wheat	come - lái	which sounded alike but were harder to depict. For instance, since 'wheat' and 'to come' have a similar sound in Old Chinese, the pictograph for wheat was used to write 'to come'. In English, if you
		
ancient	modern	

wanted to write the word, 'which', you might draw a figure on a broomstick between two clauses. Words with a similar meaning also doubled up: the pictograph of an eye was used for the verb, 'to see'. This approach worked well if the context was clear, but confusion could arise if you were to write 'the wheat has come' or 'which witch is which on the Quidditch pitch'.²⁸

The next solution was for words to share one graph that had a similar meaning or sound, but another graph indicated their distinctions. For example, droplets of water appear in the words for ocean, pool, and river, but also to excite or to incite. A word that implies the substance or metaphor of water (e.g. a fluid situation) is likely to include the graph for water. In English, for instance, to incite can also be expressed as 'stirring up trouble'.²⁹

water	ocean	pool	river	excite/ incite
	洋	池	河	激
graph	yáng	chí	hé	jī

Simple characters have one graphic component. They are often ancient words like soil, water, sheep, or pig. Compound characters have

soil - tǔ		more than one graph. Some have up to four or five graphs, but most have two: the <i>semantic</i>
ancient		graph indicates what the word means, and the
modern		<i>phonetic</i> graph indicates how to say it. Knowing
graph		that a character means a sheep, dog, or pig is
to sit - zuò		not enough; you need to know how to bleat,
		bark and grunt, so to speak, and certainly if you
		want to speak.

Sometimes the phonetic graph also reflects what a word means, especially in ancient words. For instance, the word for a male pig in Old Chinese sounded like the word for a home or family. Pigs were a part of family life in China long before writing was invented. The graph for a roof written over the graph for a pig means home or family. It does not mean a pigsty, unless no one has tidied up recently. A grunting pig was the phonetic clue for the sound of home (or the sound of family mealtimes?).³⁰

roof	family / home	male pig
		
graph	ancient	modern – jiā

ancient	modern
	
	sheep – yáng
	
	overseas, vast, ocean

In other cases, the phonetic graph is arbitrary. For instance, *yang* means an ocean, foreign or overseas, vastness (stretching beyond the horizon?) and a feeling of contentment and ease. The left side is the water graph, and the right side is the graph of a sheep. The sheep does not convey the oceanic bliss of drifting off to sleep after counting vast flocks; it is just

a plain old sheep which is also pronounced as *yang*.³¹

Borrowing one word to convey the sound of another goes back to the oracle bones and continues today as characters are chosen to write foreign words with overseas origins such as hamburger, chocolate, or London. The meaning of the graphs is usually irrelevant; the Chinese words simply sound similar enough to the imported words to represent them.

伦敦

Lúndūn
London

One character is usually spoken as one syllable, and most ancient but still common words are one syllable in length such as *xing*. However, depending on the pronunciation, the same syllable can mean a different word. This famous phonetic hurdle for the bleating foreigners results in much amusement for native speakers. For example, when I was trying to say, “every day” (*měi tiān* 每天), my Chinese friend looked concerned and said, “You have no money?” (*méi qián* 沒錢). Mandarin, a widely spoken variant of modern Chinese, has four primary tones:

Tone 1 - a steady high pitch reminiscent of the Sound of Music: 'Rāy a drop of golden sūn,' (e.g. Shāng dynasty)

Tone 2 - a short rising tone like a question: Whó? Whát? Hów? (e.g. *xíng*)

Tone 3 - a long tone that falls in pitch and rises again. In English this tone sounds doubtful or sardonic: Hǔm, I sěe, sǔre, (e.g. *wǔ*)

Tone 4 - a short sharp drop like a warning: Nò, dòn't, stòp, (e.g. *dào*).³²

While other early writing systems developed a purely phonetic script, Chinese maintains this system of words within words. However, the Roman alphabet is also used to write Chinese nowadays. The first version of Romanisation was made four centuries ago by Matteo Ricci, a Jesuit priest who features in the next issue (F3).³³ Wade-Giles is a form of Romanisation created by British diplomats in the 19th century. *Pīnyīn* 拼音 was formulated by Chinese linguists in the 20th century.³⁴

Wade-Giles	Pinyin	Characters	English
Tao	<i>Dào</i>	道	The Way
I Ching	<i>Yījīng</i>	易經	Book of Changes
Tai Chi	<i>Tàijí</i>	太極	Great Ultimate

The last word on words concerns dictionaries. English dictionaries index words in alphabetical order from aardvark to zygote. Chinese dictionaries index a word by one of its graphs which is typically known as its *radical*. For example, home/family is indexed under 'roof' and ocean is indexed under 'water'. This system was initially developed for one of the earliest Chinese dictionaries about two thousand years ago. The sound, meaning, stroke order, and graphic structure of nearly ten thousand characters were grouped under one of the so-called *radicals*. There are 214 radicals still in use today, three of which are derived from the character, *xing*.³⁵



Radical 60
see p.7



Radical 162
see p.12



Radical 144
see p.13

Notes: Online sources checked on 02/08/26.

¹ Wang Yirong was not the only person to recognise the inscriptions, but the discovery has come to be associated with him.

Sarah Allan, *The Shape of the Turtle: Myth, Art, and Cosmos in Early China*, (State University of New York Press, 1991), 177.

² The earliest oracle bone inscriptions are dated to c. 1200 BCE.

William G. Boltz, "The Invention of Writing in China", *Oriens Extremus*, **42** (2000 / 2001), 2 - 4.

³ Freshwater turtles were primarily used for divination, tortoises less so.

David N. Keightley, *Sources of Shang History* (University of California Press, 1978), 9.

Graphic Origins of Xing

3 - 7

⁴ Qiu proposes that *xing* originally meant 'road' and extrapolated meanings were 'rank' as well as to 'walk'.

Qiu Xigui, *Chinese Writing*, translated by Gilbert L. Mattos and Jerry Norman (The Society for the Study of Early China, 2000), 208 – 209.

⁵ For the importance of grids in Chinese cosmology, see:

John B. Henderson, "Geometrical Cosmography in Early China", *The Development and Decline of Chinese Cosmology* (Windstone Press, 2011), 59 – 87.

Mark Edward Lewis, *The Construction of Space in Early China*, (State University of New York Press, 2006), 245 – 250.

⁶ This layout of a capital city is adapted from a diagram by Corradini based on descriptions in the *Kao Gong Ji* (Records of the Scrutiny of Crafts) chapter of the *Zhou Li* (Rites of Zhou). He notes that it is an idealised layout and 'archaeological excavations have not revealed the existence of any capital built according to the Zhou Li'.

Piero Corradini, "Ancient China's "Ming Tang" 明堂 Between Reality and Legend", *Rivista degli studi orientali*, **69**, (1/2), 1995, 173 - 206.

⁷ Additional *xing* graphs from the Sinica Database

⁸ Paul W. Kroll, *A Student's Dictionary of Classical and Medieval Chinese*, (Koninklijke Brill, 2017), 52.

⁹ When this character meant to speak or tell the graph for a mouth, 口 *kǒu*, was sometimes added below the person. This image is not the original character. For the original representation, see:

Sarah Allan, *The Way of Water and Sprouts of Virtue* (State University of New York Press, 1997), 70.

Jinhua Jia, "Religious Origin of the Terms Dao and De and Their Signification in the Laozi," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Third Series **19**, (4), October 2009, 476.

¹⁰ Jinhua Jia, *ibid*, 476.

Goings and Doings of the Marketplace

8 - 9

¹¹ In Japanese, an archaic meaning of the character 行 is a merchants' guild or market districts of similar professions. Acc. 14th October 2025.

¹² The character for the Shang 商 dynasty nowadays means commerce or merchants. Yet while the Shang people did engage in long-distance trade, probably in the form of giving and receiving gifts, commercial transactions did not start to emerge until Eastern Zhou (F1, ii).

Constance A. Cook, "Wealth and the Western Zhou", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, **60**, (2), 1997, 264 – 266.

¹³ I have drawn on Lewis' description of market activities.

Lewis, *The Construction of Space in Early China*, 160 – 169.

¹⁴ One meaning of chong, 衝 is a 'siege engine moved on wheels' reiterating the marching advance of an army. The centre graph means 'heavy' as well as 'weighty' in the sense of importance. The character can also denote a major road or a principal line of communication.

Kroll, *A Student's Dictionary of Classical and Medieval Chinese*, 54.

Moral Conduct

10 - 11

¹⁵ One interpretation of this character 衙 is 'to arrange in proper order, for audience with a magistrate'.

Kroll, *A Student's Dictionary of Classical and Medieval Chinese*, 524.

¹⁶ Csikszentmihalyi has written extensively on this meaning of *wuxing* which he translates as 'five kinds of action'.

Mark Csikszentmihalyi, *Material Virtue, Ethics and the Body in Early China*, (Brill, 2004), 221.

Leading the Way

12 - 15

¹⁷ Evidence for the link between *dao* and the person/crossroads character is found in the earliest version of the *Laozi* (Lao-tzu) found to date. Its occupant died c. 300 BCE and his afterlife library also contained the text on *wuxing* as the five conducts. The first series of verses (Guodian *Laozi* A) use the person/crossroads character to mean *dao* but later verses switch to the walk/head character 道.

Robert G. Henricks, *Lao-Tzu's Tao Te Ching, A Translation of the Startling New Documents Found at Guodian*, (Columbia University Press, 2000), 22. Clarified by email with the author - October 2019.

¹⁸ Boodberg proposes that *dao* can also mean 'to head, 'to lead' and 'headway'.

Peter A. Boodberg, "Philological Notes on Chapter One of The Lao Tzu", *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 20 (3/4), December 1957, 599.

¹⁹ Allan notes that the two characters 道 (way) and 導 (lead or guide) were interchangeable in early texts. In one instance, *dao* meant 'to dig a water channel'.

Allan, *The Way of Water and Sprouts of Virtue*, 68.

²⁰ Jia traces how *dao* became associated with the deification of the Pole Star as the fount (or head) of the cosmos. She writes: 'Then, *shou* was added to the constituent hang 行 (to walk or move, road) to indicate the rotational movement and guidance of the Pole (Star)/Heaven'.

Jia, "Religious Origin of the Terms Dao and De and Their Signification in the *Laozi*," 474

Since *xing* can mean to circulate, an orbital movement, it is also applied to the course of the stars and planets.

²¹ *Guanzi, Vol 1, Political, Economic and Philosophical Essays from Early China*, translated by W. Allyn Ricket (Cheng & Tsui Company 2001), 119.

²² The meteorological consequences of doing the wrong thing at the wrong time of year is drawn from the "Seasonal Rules" chapter of the *Huananzi*, a weighty tome on the art of ruling compiled at the court of Liu An, King of Huainan, c. 130 – 139 BCE.

Liu An, King of Huainan, *The Huainanzi: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Government in Early Han China*, translated and edited by John A. Major et.al., (Columbia University Press, 2010), 182 – 206.

Conclusion**15 - 17**

²³ The left side of *cai*, 材, is the graph for a tree, the implication being timber as a raw material but also reflecting growth, innate properties which emerge over time.

²⁴ I think the translation of five processes is linked to Joseph Needham.

‘...the conception of the five elements was not so much one of a series of five sorts of fundamental matter (particles do not come into the question), as of five sorts of fundamental processes.’ He then writes: ‘It is often pointed out, therefore, that the term ‘element’ has never been very satisfactory for *hsing* [*xing*], the very etymology of which, as we have just seen, had from the beginnings the implication of movement... Nevertheless, the term ‘element’ has for so long been used of the Wu Hsing [*wuxing*] that it is hardly possible to discard it.

Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China, Volume 2, History of Scientific Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 1962), 243 – 244.

However, scholars subsequently railed against this declaration and new translations were proposed such agents, phases, and so on.

²⁵ John Knoblock & Jeffrey Riegel, *The Annals of Lu Buwei, A Complete Translation and Study* (Stanford University Press, 2000), 283.

In the passage, Earth, Wood, Metal, Fire and Water are listed in the order by which they overpower each other – also called the conquest, control or regulating cycle (see F2, 9 – 11).

Words within Words**18 – 21**

²⁶ This guide to Chinese writing is simplified to make it easy to follow. For more detailed yet still concise overviews, see the following articles:

Boltz, “The Invention of Writing in China”, 1 - 17.

William G. Boltz, “Early Chinese Writing” *World Archaeology* **17** (3) February 1986, 426 – 429.

²⁷ Aside from the pictographs some graphs were non-representational abstract signs from the outset such as the diagonal cross for number five.

Jerry Norman, *Chinese*, (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 60.

²⁸ There is a semantic relationship between ‘wheat’ and ‘to come’ because it was not a native grain but came from the Near East via Central Asia at some point before the origins of Chinese writing c. 1200 BCE.

Ping-Ti Ho, “The Loess and the Origin of Chinese Agriculture”, *The American Historical Review* **75** (1) October 1969, 26.

²⁹ Boltz, “Early Chinese Writing” 426 – 429.

³⁰ The roof over the pig was a depiction of family life because in ancient times people enclosed pigs in pens and built toilets over them. No wonder the pigs wanted to escape their tethers!

Brian Lander, *The King’s Harvest, A Political Ecology of China from the First Farmers to the First Empire*, (Yale University Press, 2021), 121.

³¹ Kroll, *A Student’s Dictionary of Classical and Medieval Chinese*, 532.

³² Although Mandarin has adopted simplified characters, given the historical focus of these articles, I will use traditional characters.

³³ Michele Ruggieri S.J., Matteo Ricci S.J., *Dicionário Português-Chinês*, Ed., John W. Witek S.J., (Ricci Institute for Chinese-Western Cultural History [University of San Francisco]; Biblioteca Nacional Portugal, Instituto Português do Oriente, [San Francisco, CA], [Lisboa], 2001), 151 – 161.

³⁴ Taiwan and Hong Kong use alternative forms of Romanisation.

³⁵ The first Chinese dictionary to develop a system of classifying characters was the *Shuowen Jiezi* compiled by Xu Shen (c. 58 – 148 CE). The indexing graphs were called *bushou* (部首 - section headers). Scholars call them *determinatives* or *classifiers*. The term, *radical*, is commonly used but it is not strictly correct in its meaning.

Boltz, “Early Chinese Writing”, 428.