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RULES OF CONDUCT  
AT A CROSSROADS

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FOUNDATION – ISSUE TWO  
HEAVEN IS ROUND

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# Heaven is Round

New Perspectives on the Five Phases

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## FOUNDATION SERIES

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| F1 | <b>Riding the Waves of Change</b><br>Introduces Heaven is Round and the Foundation series.   |
| F2 | <b>Rules of Conduct at a Crossroads</b><br><i>Wu</i> means five. This issue explores the myriad meanings of the word, <i>xing</i> , plus a simple guide to Chinese characters. |
| F3 | <b>Mission of the Five Elements</b><br>The Five Elements is the oldest translation of <i>wuxing</i> . A missionary agenda lay behind this choice.                              |
| F4 | <b>Long Live the Ancestors</b><br>Myths and rituals of water, trees, fire and soil, and auspices of five related to the Xia and Shang eras, 2 <sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE.    |
| F5 | <b>Celestial Configurations</b><br>Myths and rituals of metal, and auspices of five during the Zhou dynasty, 1 <sup>st</sup> millennium BCE.                                   |
| F6 | <b>Heaven's Order</b><br>The theory of <i>wuxing</i> applied to the art of ruling  |
| F7 | <b>Balancing Act</b><br><i>Yin-yang</i> in early Chinese thought   |



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- \* I use the Chinese phrase, *wuxing*, when I refer to the traditional theory and the five phases for the new perspectives.
- \* I use lower case for the natural resources (fire, water, etc.,) and upper case for the abstract processes (Fire, Water, etc.,).
- \* The dates of people, dynasties and eras can be found at the bottom of the relevant page or section.

**F2 Chinese words** – tone marks, page nos. and traditional characters

Listen to the Audio Guide to learn more about the tones in Mandarin. I use *pinyin* unless it's a quote or a common phrase like Tai Chi. This list does not include the words in the Appendix of this issue which is a simple guide to how Chinese characters developed (pp. 18 – 21).

Guǎnzǐ	i	管子	shù	9	術
wǔxíng	iii	五行	yínháng	9	銀行
yīn-yáng	iii	陰陽	hángyè	9	行業
háng	iii	行	chōng	9	衝
Ānyáng	1	安陽	yá	11	衙
Hénán	1	河南	kàn	11	衍
Wáng Yiróng	1	王懿榮	dào	12	道
Shāng dynasty	2	商朝	shǒu	12	首
Qīng dynasty	2	清朝	dǎo	12	導
Pǔyí	2	溥儀	chuò	13	辵
Yìjīng	4	易經	yǎn	13	衍
chì chù	7	彳亍	tiān qú	15	天衢
dé	7	得	wǔcái	16	五材
xiàng	8	街	wǔdé	16	五德
xuàn	9	銜	pīnyīn	21	拼音

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## Introduction

The theory of *wuxing* suffers from a surfeit of translations: five phases, elements, agents, processes, and forces to name a few. Given that its components are called Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal and Water, any choice of translation begs the question of what they are understood to be. That evolved over time from raw natural resources to rarefied cosmic powers (c. 4<sup>th</sup> - 1<sup>st</sup> C BCE). Different translations have been proposed to reflect stages of its development. Hence, there is no translation that works in all contexts (and which pleases all of the experts all of the time).

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 that have stuck to it like barnacles to a shipwreck. I have decided to use its Chinese name, *wuxing*, for the traditional theory and one of its translations—the five phases—for the new perspectives. It's not a perfect solution but an acceptable workaround. Nevertheless, the conundrum of translation led me to explore the various meanings of this word, *xing* 行.\*

*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 of how 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. Used as a noun, *xing* can mean a road, line, row, column, or rank.

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

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\* This character 行 can also be pronounced as *hang*, but since the theory is usually called *wuxing*, to keep things simple, I'll use *xing* throughout. For some examples of *hang*, see p.9 of this issue.

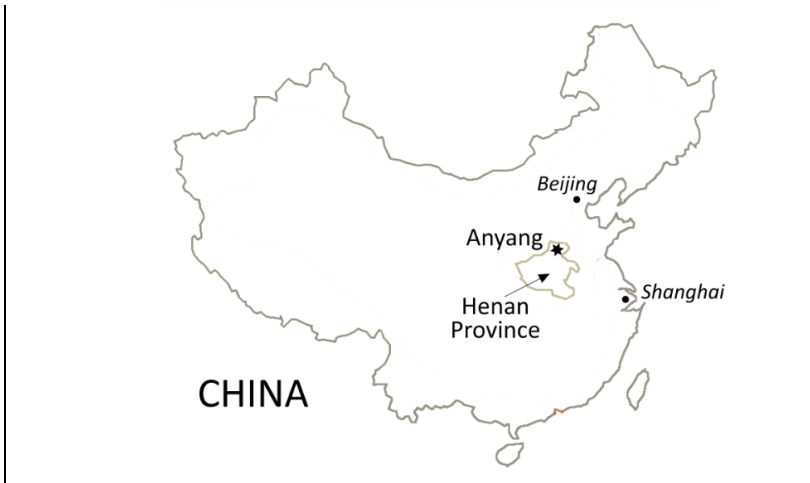


# RULES OF CONDUCT AT A CROSSROADS

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## Unearthing the Oracle Bones

During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, in a region of Henan Province called Anyang, farmers kept finding bones in their fields. They sold them to pharmacists who ground them into powder to use in remedies. These 'dragon bones' were believed 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.<sup>1</sup>



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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup>

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. Flaming hot rods were inserted into holes in the bones until they cracked. The piercing sound was not the squeals of animal spirits decrying endless human exploitation, no; 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.<sup>4</sup>

It is a strange twist of fate that one of China's earliest dynasties, the Shang, was unearthed while its last, the Qing, was crumbling 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 Chinese history was becoming apparent. The Imperial Academy closed its doors in 1905 after centuries of service.

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.

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Wang Yirong 1845 – 1900  
Shang c. 1600 – 1045 BCE

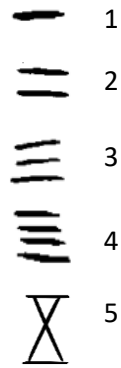
Puyi 1906 – 1967  
Qing 1644 – 1912

### Graphic Origins of Xing

Both *wu* and *xing* appear on the oracle bones but not as *wuxing*; the theory took another thousand years to unfold. *Wu* was a diagonal cross sandwiched between two horizontal lines. One to four were horizontal lines. Since five lines were presumably unwieldy to read and write, a diagonal cross replaced the centre lines.

*Xing* was depicted as a crossroads. This image was most likely based on the thoroughfares of Shang settlements. How many thoroughfares would depend on the size of the settlement, but we can assume there would be at least two: one running north to south and the other running east to west.

oracle script



to go, to walk, a road,



oracle script

bronze

Although *xing* was represented by a crossroads, the word has a range of meanings which cluster around this junction. The crossroads was a visual mnemonic, a memory aid, rather than exclusively meaning a crossroads.

For example, *xing* can mean to go, to walk or to proceed. In Shang settlements, people would have travelled along these thoroughfares going about their daily business with their 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 which led 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.

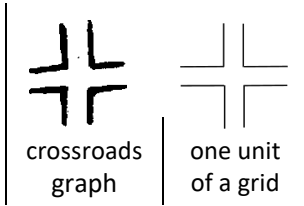
Divination is used to ascertain when, how, or whether to proceed. The Shang royal ancestors whose missives resounded from the cracked shells of turtles judged whether the king's plans should go ahead. They had the power to clear a spiritual pathway for his worldly endeavours. Ensuring that a course of action will proceed smoothly entails not only deciding when to act but also how to act, your conduct. The *Yijing* (Book

of Changes) offers counsel on attitude as well as action. Your conduct, your behaviour, is another meaning of *xing*. Conduct can imply how you carry yourself, your gait, your manner of walking, your posture, as well as how you carry out an action such as conducting a 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 has to 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. We'll return to this theme (p.10).

As well as the common folk with their animals, goods and carts in tow, soldiers would have also proceeded along the thoroughfares. The Shang warriors were a fearsome military might in northern China. Many settlements would have doubled up as garrisons, military outposts, as the Shang endeavoured to expand their hold on the most fertile land for growing crops or to mine ores in order to make weapons. As the soldiers headed out of a settlement to do battle, we might imagine that they proceeded in formation, in rank order. They may have returned to the settlement worse for wear, but hopefully with sufficient honour to carry themselves well, 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 and flanks either side, as well as their attire and insignia show their rank order. Picture a modern military display with all its attendant pomp and circumstance. Lines and rows of soldiers all march with a particular gait; it is not like normal walking. A ruler presides over the display as a demonstration of his (probably) 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. <sup>5</sup>

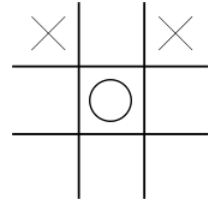


crossroads graph

one unit of a grid

Vertical lines and horizontal rows together 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 that cross on a piece of paper.

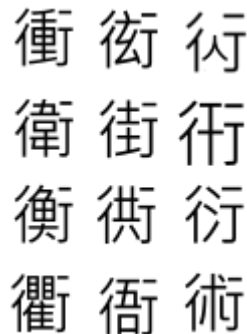
Think of drawing a Noughts and Crosses game. Two vertical lines and two horizontal rows will create the nine squares of your game. They will be filled with strategically placed noughts and crosses.



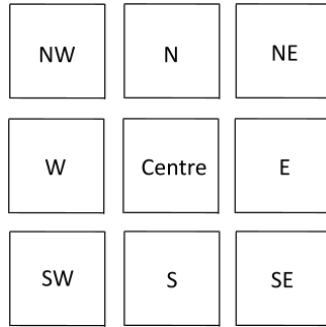
	3	6						
	5							
9		4						
					2			
								8

Another useful image is the nine-by-nine grid of a Sudoku game with its 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.

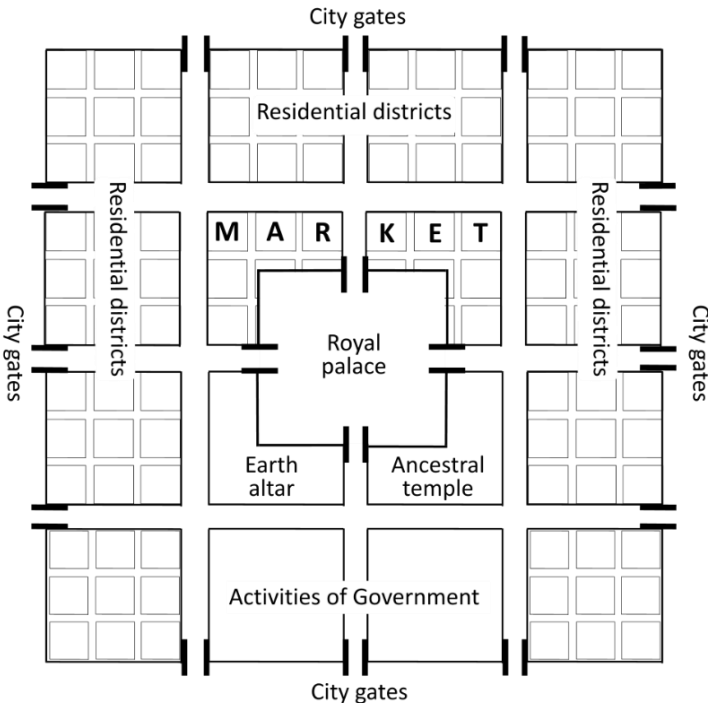
Columns and rows are also the grid structure for Chinese writing, which is different to the standard western script. We start in the top left corner, write horizontally across the page, and start off a new row below the first one. Chinese writing starts in the top right corner, characters are written 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. When I asked a Japanese friend what *wuxing* means (the pronunciation is different), she looked at me quizzically as if my question was too basic to warrant an answer. She replied, "It means five lines of text." She was a museum curator after all!




Heading back now to three dimensions, a traditional image of Chinese cosmology is a round heaven and square earth. The square earth was partitioned as a grid. Nine squares is a key configuration with a central square and eight outer squares: four for the cardinal directions and four for the intercardinal directions. While a planet's spherical shape was not obvious in ancient times, even modern maps have grid lines. Longitudinal lines run north to south and latitudinal lines run east to west. <sup>6</sup>





Grids were also the basis for 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. 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE) with a central palace, residential districts, government offices, market quarters, a temple for the ancestors and an altar to the earth (F4, 17 – 19). Every cell had its place in the cosmological scheme of things. <sup>7</sup>




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).

	<p>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</p>
<p>variations c. 1000 – 200 BC <sup>8</sup></p>	<p>modern character</p>


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. <sup>9</sup>

	<p>take a step with your left foot      right foot</p>		<p>walk slowly, hesitate</p>
<p>oracle script</p>	<p>→ graphs</p>	<p><i>chichu</i></p>	

<p><i>de</i></p> 	<p>The left graph is found in various words, many of which imply action. For example, <i>de</i> 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.</p>
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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 someone of a senior rank blasting out orders from his megaphone at the junction of the two thoroughfares. Only a few mainly archaic characters have this structure (see p.5) but one is very famous as we’ll see in due course. They will also act as illustrations in the following sections. <sup>11</sup>

<p>speaking, tell <sup>10</sup></p>	
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**Goings and Doings of the Marketplace**

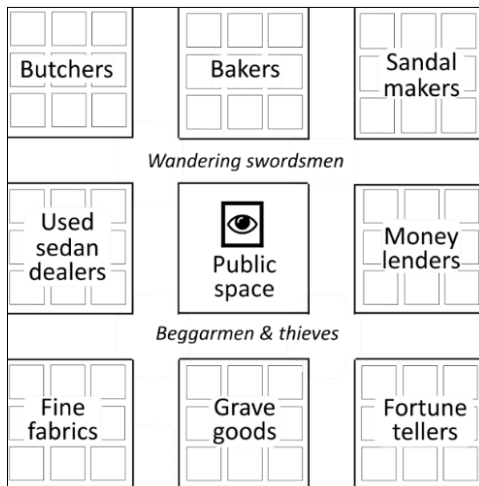
Let’s now perambulate around the city’s market quarters. Some of the meanings of *xing* hark back to the activities of a marketplace. Markets had districts for different trades from fruit sellers to fortune tellers if your financial fortunes were not looking so peachy this year. Their stalls would have been laid out in lines and rows.<sup>12</sup>

Markets attracted wandering swordsmen adept at cut-throat deals in back alleys, on the lookout for some ready cash working as extras

	<i>back alley</i> <i>side-street</i>
<i>xiang</i>	

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.<sup>13</sup>

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 market districts below are obviously figurative, although there are some precedents. ‘Grave goods’ means items to place in tombs.<sup>14</sup>



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?

術  
xuan  
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  
shu  
specialist skill  
craftsmanship  
technique

bank  
銀行  
yinhang

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  
hangye

衝  
chong  
charge into, butt, collide, run against  
15

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.

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## 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.<sup>17</sup>

衙	<i>public office, magistrate's court</i> <sup>16</sup>
ya	

Marketplace dealings must have been among the cases judged: 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. 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	<i>pleased, satisfied open, upfront, frank, forthright</i>
kan	

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.

<p><i>dao</i> - way</p> <p>archaic   modern</p>	<p>The earliest written forms of <i>dao</i> have the graph of a head in the centre of the crossroads. A hand or foot is sometimes added below. Although <i>dao</i> as a word does not date back to the oracle bones, it is thought to be an abbreviated version of the person in the centre of the crossroads (see p. 7).<sup>18</sup></p>
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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 example of action and direction set out

*head (shou) is depicted as an eye and eyebrow*



archaic | modern

<p><i>lead, guide, conduct</i></p> <p><i>dao</i></p>	<p>by your head.<sup>19</sup> In Japanese, the graph for a head also means a neck. Your head turns this way and that in order 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 <i>chichu</i> manner. Both would struggle to lead the Way.<sup>20</sup></p>
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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.



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.\*<sup>22</sup>

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.

*\*Guanzi Vol 1, Political, Economic and Philosophical Essays from Early China.* Translated by W. Allyn Rickett, copyright © 2001 by Cheng & Tsui Company Inc. Used by permission of Cheng & Tsui Company Inc.

*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.<sup>23</sup>

Crossroads of Heaven  
a celestial junction in  
Scorpio

天衢

*tian qu*

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 interpreting cracks on turtle shells has waned in favour of the step-by-step sequences 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.

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## Conclusion

I found this article interesting and enjoyable to put together. However, while I might 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 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 briefly summarise how some of the translations reflect different meanings of *xing* and different stages of the theory's development.

Early references to these five natural resources as a group were called *wucai*. *Cai* 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. *Cai* can also mean 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 qualities of their materials. Clay, metal and timber are transformed into ceramics, weapons, and musical instruments echoing *xing* as skilful action.<sup>24</sup>

Translating *wuxing* as the five processes was originally proposed as a reflection of the behavioural properties of the five materials. As a craftsman, you need to know that water will seep into the tiniest 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.<sup>25</sup>

By the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, amid the burgeoning ideas of the Warring States, the five natural resources were transforming into cosmic powers. The earliest account of the control or regulating cycle is how Fire, Water, Wood, Metal and Earth presided over dynastic eras (F1, 2). The passage refers to *wude*, five powers (F1, n.4)), but they presented as a sequence, an order, which is one meaning of *xing*. The grid structure, especially the nine-square grid, is cosmologically linked to the cycles of *wuxing*. I'll return to this point in Foundation Five and Six.

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 that has intentions, makes decisions and perform actions. In other words, an agent is an actor and *xing* means to act. For ancient minds, all sorts of things had agency from rocks to rivers. The Shang royal ancestors were agents (F4, 10 – 12). From gods to ghosts, angels to ancestors; these ephemeral entities have the power, the agency, to influence the banes and boons of human life. Fire, Water, Wood, Metal and Earth were also divine powers which sent forth omens; hence, the translation as the five agents.

The five phases as a translation is associated with a mature phase (ironically) of the theory's development in which *yin-yang* and *wuxing* were successive phases of *qi* that underlay the interconnected activity of the sky, the natural world, and human life. Still cosmic agents, the emphasis is on their orderly progression: how water *qi* transforms into wood *qi* and governs fire *qi*. We'll revisit this theme in the next issue.

Writing this article may have left me none the wiser about which translation best suits the theory of *wuxing*, but it has been really helpful for the new perspectives. In particular, I want to explore this theme 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. We do not pray to rain gods; we seed clouds. Yet as our social infrastructures become more complex, ostensibly to meet human needs, paradoxically, we can feel less control over our lives. Mental health and political engagement are predicated on having 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 various meanings of *xing* is how much they reflect the relationship between Wood and Metal. I say so in retrospect, as it 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 reflection.

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, the 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. The next issue, Foundation Three, is devoted to the most well-known translation of *wuxing* - the five elements.

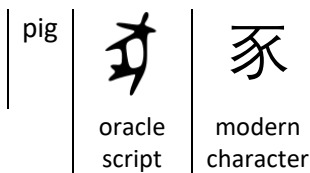
## Appendix: Words within Words

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.<sup>26</sup>

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 series of lines which look more like the fat on a streaky bacon rasher.<sup>27</sup>



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
	
oracle script	character <i>lái</i>

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 the verb, ‘to come’. In English, if you wanted to write the




word, ‘which’, you might draw a figure on a broomstick in 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’.<sup>28</sup>

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	ocean	pool	river	excite/ incite
				
graph	<i>yáng</i>	<i>chí</i>	<i>hé</i>	<i>jī</i>




water. In English, for instance, to incite can also be expressed as ‘stirring up trouble’.<sup>29</sup>

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





Earth (soil)	
oracle script	
modern character	
used as a graph	
	to sit - <i>zuò</i>

more than one graph. Some have up to four or five graphs, but most have two: the *semantic* graph indicates what the word means, and the *phonetic* graph indicates how to say it. Knowing that a character means a sheep, dog, or pig is not enough; you have 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?).<sup>30</sup>

roof	family / home	male pig
		
graph	oracle script	characters – <i>jiā</i> (archaic - <i>kae</i> )

In other cases, the phonetic graph is arbitrary. For instance, *yang* means an ocean, something foreign or overseas, vastness (stretching beyond a horizon?) and a feeling of ease and contentment. The left side is the water graph, and the right side is 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 that is also pronounced as *yang*.<sup>31</sup>

	<i>yáng</i> sheep	
	ocean, vast, overseas	
oracle script		character

Borrowing one word to convey the sound of another dates back to the oracle bones and continues today as characters are chosen to write foreign words that have overseas origins such as hamburger, chocolate, or London. The meaning of the graphs is not usually relevant; 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 *xīng*. 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*).<sup>32</sup>

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).<sup>33</sup> Wade-Giles is a form of Romanisation created by British diplomats in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. *Pīnyīn* 拼音 was formulated by Chinese linguists in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>34</sup>

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	Lit: 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 these *radicals*. 214 radicals are still in use today. That's almost ten times more shapes to remember than ABC! Three radicals are derived from the character, *xíng*.<sup>35</sup>



Radical 60  
see p. 7



Radical 162  
see p. 12



Radical 144  
see p. 13

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## NOTES

Online and open sources are underlined. Stable URLs are not dated; otherwise, the date of access is provided. Oracle bone images are licensed under [Creative Commons](#) unless another source is given.

### Unearthing the Oracle Bones

1 - 2

<sup>1</sup> The map is a modification of the following source:

[Dagvadorj](#), "[Atlas Yuan Minimal Edition](#)" licensed under Creative Commons. Acc. 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2025

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> 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

<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> 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, 175 - 176.

<sup>8</sup> Additional *xing* graphs from the [Sinica Database](#). Acc. 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2025.

<sup>9</sup> Paul W. Kroll, *A Student’s Dictionary of Classical and Medieval Chinese*, (Koninklijke Brill, 2017), 52.

<sup>10</sup> 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.

<sup>11</sup> Jinhua Jia, *ibid*, 476.

## Goings and Doings of the Marketplace

8 - 9

<sup>12</sup> In Japanese, an archaic meaning of the character 行 is a merchants’ guild or market districts of similar professions. Acc. 14<sup>th</sup> October 2025.

<sup>13</sup> 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.

<sup>14</sup> I have drawn on Lewis’ description of market activities.

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

<sup>15</sup> 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**

<sup>16</sup> One interpretation of this character 衛 is ‘to arrange in proper order, for audience with a magistrate’.

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

<sup>17</sup> 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**

<sup>18</sup> 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.

<sup>19</sup> 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.

<sup>20</sup> 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.

<sup>21</sup> 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.

<sup>22</sup> *Guanzi, Vol 1, Political, Economic and Philosophical Essays from Early China*, translated by W. Allyn Rickett (Cheng & Tsui Company 2001), 119.

<sup>23</sup> 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

<sup>24</sup> 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.

<sup>25</sup> I believe 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.’

However, 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.

However, scholars have subsequently railed against his authoritative declaration and new translations have been proposed.

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

## Words within Words

18 – 21

<sup>26</sup> 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.

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

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

<sup>28</sup> 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.

<sup>29</sup> Boltz, “Early Chinese Writing” 426 – 429.

<sup>30</sup> 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.

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

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

<sup>33</sup> 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.

<sup>34</sup> Taiwan and Hong Kong use alternative forms of Romanisation.

<sup>35</sup> 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.