

Conforming to Heaven
Organizational Principles of the *Shuō wén jiě zì*

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MA Thesis

Asian Studies: Chinese Studies

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Word count: 14,879 (excluding appendices)

14 July 2016

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research topic

The topic of this study is the Eastern Hàn dynasty (25-220 CE) text, *Shuō wén jiě zì* (*Explanations of patterns and analysis of written words*¹, hereafter the *Shuō wén*), written by Xǔ Shèn (ca 55 – ca 149 CE) and presented to the throne in 121 CE. It is one of the most crucial texts in the Chinese tradition of theorizing language. The *Shuō wén* was the first Chinese text to systematically analyze the structure of Chinese characters. It was also the first text to arrange characters² in sections based on shared graphic components, which Xǔ Shèn called 部 *bù* ‘sections’ or 首 *shǒu* ‘headers’ but are commonly known today as 部首 *bùshǒu* — literally ‘section headers’ but often translated as ‘radicals’.³ Because of its attempt to systematically organize and analyze Chinese characters, the *Shuō wén* is often regarded as a dictionary. However, it is unlike many other dictionaries that often list words by pronunciation or, in the case of modern Chinese dictionaries, by stroke count. The organizational principles in the *Shuō wén* are different. Contemporary cosmological and philosophical speculations seem to be important in the organization of characters. Xǔ Shèn arranged nearly 10,000 characters under 540 radicals. In the book’s postface, he briefly describes the organizational principles of the radicals:

此十四篇，五百四十部也。九千三百五十三文，重一千一百六十三。解說凡十三萬三千四百四十一字。其建首也，立一為耑。方以類聚，物以群分。同牽條屬，共理相貫。雜而不越，據形系聯。引而申之，以究萬原。畢終於亥，知化窮冥。

The 14 sections of this work comprise 540 sections. They cover 9,353 characters (文 *wén*), with 1,163 variants (重 *chóng*). My analyses and explanations total 133,441 characters. As for the establishing of their headers, 一 *yī* is set up as the beginning. Matters are brought together according to types, objects are divided according to groups. What is of the same branch is linked together, what is of the same principle is strung together. Though they are mixed together, they are not transgressive. They are connected based on graphic structure. Drawing out and extending them, to investigate the myriad origins. Concluding at the end with 亥 *hài*, the transformations have been made known and the mysteries have been exhausted.⁴

¹ My translation of the title follows Françoise Bottéro’s (2002) interpretation of *wén* 文 and *zì* 字.

² Throughout my thesis, the term “character” is used as an umbrella term to include both radicals and characters subsumed under radicals, so-called “derivates”. In line with traditional Chinese philology, I understand characters as comprising three elements: graphic structure, sound, and meaning.

³ Other translations include ‘classifiers’, ‘significs’, ‘keys’, see Wilkinson 2015: 74.

⁴ Xǔ 1963: 319. My interpretation follows Tāng 1997: 2183-2184.

It appears from this passage that Xǔ Shèn thought of his organization as providing insight into the world of things, not merely language and writing. He probably chose the number 540 by multiplying six by nine, then multiplying that result by ten.⁵ In early Chinese numerology, as represented in the *Yì jīng* (also known as the *I Ching* or *Book of Changes*), six and nine represent *yīn* and *yáng* respectively,⁶ and Xǔ Shèn defines ten as “the complete number”⁷. Xǔ Shèn selected as the first of his 540 radicals 一 *yī*, which, to him, represents the origin of the universe. The last radical in his scheme is 亥 *hài*, which belongs to the so-called Heavenly Stems and Earthly Branches (天干地支 *tiāngān dìzhī*) used for cosmological purposes like calculating time. It appears that Xǔ Shèn’s sequence of radicals is meant to reflect the natural order of the world. Cosmological ideas of this kind deeply influenced both the organization and explanation of characters in Xǔ Shèn’s text, and his work provides rich information, not only about the meaning of words in ancient texts, but also about early China’s customs and worldviews. This thesis analyzes these remarkable organizational principles of the *Shuō wén*.

1.2 Literature review

Despite the *Shuō wén*’s significance, some of its fundamental principles are still not satisfactorily understood, such as the organizational principles of characters. Over the centuries, numerous scholars have proffered their views on the *Shuō wén*, and they occasionally address the issues discussed in this study.

The first person to discuss the arrangement of radicals in the *Shuō wén* was the Sòng dynasty (960-1279) scholar Xú Kǎi (920-974), who wrote the *Shuō wén jiě zì xì zhuàn*. Xú Kǎi was mainly concerned with elucidating the meaning of the entries, and explaining Xǔ Shèn’s reasonings. This approach coincides with my own, and his commentary set the rough model for many later studies.⁸ In chapter 35 of his commentary, Xú Kǎi suggests a rationale behind the arrangement of all 540 radicals. His interpretation is solely based on semantic considerations. In his view, the radicals are connected to each other by their meanings. This interpretation sets him apart from many other commentators, and he even seems to contradict Xǔ Shèn’s own aforementioned postface statement that radicals “are connected on the basis of graphic structure”. Because of his

⁵ Wàn 2014: 19.

⁶ The broken hexagram-line -- in the *Yì jīng* represents *yīn* and is called 六 *liù* ‘six’. The unbroken hexagram-line — represents *yáng* and is called 九 *jiǔ* ‘nine’.

⁷ Xǔ 1963: 50.

⁸ Boltz (In Loewe) 1993: 457.

presupposition that semantic considerations alone govern the relationships between radicals, his discussions sometimes yield far-fetched conclusions, seeing tenuous connections in meanings. For example, he interprets the connection between the radical 犛 *máo* ‘yak’ and 告 *gào* ‘announce’ as:

牛勞則善仰而告人，故次之以告。

When oxen (yaks) are tired, they tend to raise their heads and announce it [i.e. bellow] to people. Therefore, 犛 *máo* (‘yak’) is followed by 告 *gào* (‘announce’).⁹

That said, his interpretations sometime present insightful interpretations of the semantic connection between certain radicals, which are not emphasized by other scholars. Xú Kǎi’s interpretations are discussed throughout my analysis.

Other relevant pre-modern works include the commentaries of Duàn Yùcái (1735-1815), Wáng Jūn (1784-1854), and Huáng Kǎn (1886-1935). In his commentary *Shuō wén jiě zì zhù*, Duàn Yùcái (1988) presents his view on some of the organizational principles:

凡部之先後，以形之相近為次。凡每部中字之先后，以義之相引為次 [...] 說文每部自首至尾次第井井，如一篇文字，如一而元，元，始也。始而后有天，天莫大焉，故次以丕。而吏之从一終焉，是也。

The sequential order of radicals is based on structural similarity between radicals. The sequential order of characters within radicals is based on the extension of meaning. [...] In every radical (section) of the *Shuō wén*, the characters are arranged carefully from beginning to end. The [arrangement of] characters in the 一 *yī* [‘oneness, origin’] section is an example of this. It starts with 一 *yī* which is followed by 元 *yuán*, 元 *yuán* means ‘origin’; after the origin there is 天 *tiān* [‘Heaven’], as there is nothing greater than 天 *tiān*! Thus, it is followed by 丕 *pī* [‘great’]; then comes 吏 *lì* [‘official’], which is the last of the characters subsumed under 一 *yī*.¹⁰

Contrasting Xú Kǎi, Duàn Yùcái takes structural similarity to be the leading principle of radical arrangement. This coincides well with Xǔ Shèn’s own postface statement and aptly explains the connection between many radicals. As shown in my case study, however, structural similarity alone is unlikely to provide a satisfactory explanation in all cases.

⁹ Xú 1987: 299.

¹⁰ Duàn 1988: 1.

As for Duàn's explanation of the arrangement of characters subsumed under radicals, the so-called 'derivates'¹¹, my analysis's overall conclusion agrees with his, surmising a basis on semantic considerations. As we shall see, however, the statement that derivates "are arranged carefully from beginning to end", while true in terms of 一 *yī* (Duàn's example), might not hold true in other cases. Throughout my analysis, there are numerous examples of inconsistencies, where characters are grouped or placed in unexpected fashions. Another slight problem occurs in Duàn's explanation of how the four derivates under 一 *yī* are arranged based on their semantic connections. While this is probably true, he does not explain the alleged semantic connection between 丕 *pī* and 吏 *lì* (or 一 *yī* and 吏 *lì* for that matter), only mentioning that 吏 *lì* is the last character subsumed under 一 *yī*. My own analysis provides an interpretation of how 吏 *lì* relates to the context of the 一 *yī* radical.

Wáng Jūn (1983), in his *Shuō wén shì lì*, interprets the above passage from the *Shuō wén*'s postface as including both graphic and semantic connections between radicals. According to Wáng, the sentence "What is of the same branch is linked together, what is of the same principle is strung together" refers to the semantic connection between radicals. According to Wáng, this is Xǔ Shèn's main principle for connecting radicals; and the phrase "they are connected on the basis of graphic structure" refers to the graphic connections between radicals, which Wáng considers secondary to the semantic principle.¹² Regardless of if Wáng Jūn correctly interprets the postface's passage, his explanation is original in that it acknowledges the existence of both semantic and graphic principles for connecting radicals.

Huáng Kǎn (1964) agrees with Wáng Jūn's interpretation that the radical arrangement is based on both semantic and graphic considerations. As an example of radicals arranged based on their graphic connections, Huáng Kǎn highlights the *Shuō wén*'s first seven radicals: 一 *yī*, 丿 [上] *shàng*, 示 *shì*, 三 *sān*, 王 *wáng*, 玉 *yù*, and 玨 *jué*. Huáng mentions 齒 *chǐ* 'teeth' and 牙 *yá* 'molar teeth' as exemplary of radicals arranged by their semantic connections.¹³ Although Huáng Kǎn, like Wáng Jūn, acknowledges the existence of multiple principles (i.e. semantic and graphic) for the arrangement of radicals, they both seem to keep these principles separate. In contrast, my own analysis suggests that, in some cases, radicals are connected through graphic and semantic considerations simultaneously. This will be shown through the six radicals (excluding 玨 *jué*) mentioned by Huáng Kǎn above. To keep an overly sharp distinction between semantic and graphic principles, might, in my view, somewhat misrepresent Xǔ Shèn's organization.

¹¹ I borrow this term from Serruys 1984.

¹² Wáng Jūn 1983: 385.

¹³ Huáng 1964: 18.

As for the organization of derivatives, Wáng Jūn and Huáng Kǎn both list several arrangement principles. Wáng Jūn recognizes the following four principles: 1) characters representing concrete objects tend to precede characters representing abstract things; 2) characters closely related to the radical tends to precede characters more distantly related to the radical; 3) characters of positive meanings precede those of a negative meaning; 4) names of Hàn dynasty emperors are placed first in the radical section and left unexplained.¹⁴

Huáng Kǎn summarizes the arrangement of derivatives under three main principles: 1) the arrangement generally starts with concrete names and objects, proceeding to more abstract matters; 2) characters with same or similar pronunciation are grouped together; 3) characters glossed in similar terms tend to be grouped together.¹⁵

To illustrate his arrangement, Huáng Kǎn obtains some examples from the 示 *shì* section, which is included in my own analysis and will be discussed in more detail throughout my analysis. Generally, however, both Wáng Jūn's and Huáng Kǎn's principles, although shedding some light on the main principles for organizing characters in radical sections, are highly general, providing little information about the specific structure of individual sections. My own analysis also shows that the validity of Huáng Kǎn's second principle, at least concerning some of his specific examples, is highly disputable. Furthermore, neither Wáng Jūn nor Huáng Kǎn mention the existence of larger semantic series that structure the radical sections. I illustrate the existence of these series throughout my analysis.¹⁶

Several modern studies have been done on the *Shuō wén*'s character arrangements, mostly by Chinese scholars. These studies mostly rely on the above-mentioned classical commentaries, but there have been some new attempts to elucidate implicit principles unmentioned by Xǔ Shèn or the classical commentaries. Such an example is the work of Zuǒ Sīmín (2015), which attempts to thoroughly demonstrate how Xǔ Shèn's radical system represents the doctrine of unity of heaven and man (天人合一 *tiān rén hé yī*). My own analysis yields a similar conclusion about philosophical doctrines' influences on Xǔ Shèn's organization. In addition, I show how the doctrine of unity of heaven and man can be seen within the 一 *yī* section alone, which is not noted by Zuǒ. A similar but much less elaborate interpretation is advanced by Huáng Lǐhóng (2013). Although Zuǒ and Huáng both clearly recognize the philosophical principles behind Xǔ Shèn's organization, they leave undiscussed the implications this has for understanding Xǔ Shèn's conception of writing. For an historical overview of the study of radical arrangement in China, see Yáo (2013).

¹⁴ Wáng Jūn 1983: 385.

¹⁵ Huáng 1964: 18.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Another issue concerning the organization of characters relevant to my study, is the relationship between the *Shuō wén* and early Chinese culture. This is important for understanding how Xǔ Shèn's organization and explanation of characters was influenced by contemporary or earlier cultures (ideologies, doctrines, customs, etc.). One of the best sources on this topic is Wáng Níng (2000). The advantage of his study is that, compared to many other studies, he restricts himself well to proofs based on Xǔ Shèn's text alone, without freely forming links between Xǔ Shèn's text and other early Chinese sources. Wáng mentions very little, however, about Hàn philosophy influences on the *Shuō wén*. As we shall see, contemporary philosophy, particularly cosmology, played an important part in Xǔ Shèn's text.

The *Shuō wén* has since long attracted sinologists' attentions. An eminent scholar on the *Shuō wén* is Paul Serruys. In Serruys (1984), he studies the organization of the 540 radicals. He emphasizes both graphical and semantic connections between radicals. His study shows "how one radical is supposed to lead naturally to the next, either on the basis of the graphic structure, or the meaning of the words, and their etymological relationship."¹⁷ Serruys's study is valuable inasmuch as it presents the entire Xǔ Shèn radical system, giving readers a picture of the system as a whole. However, Serruys provides only a few short comments on Xǔ Shèn's text. Consequently, he, like Xǔ Shèn, leaves the connection between many of the radicals unexplained. Concerning the radicals chosen for this study, he explains little on the radicals' philosophical meanings, a topic arguably equally important in linking the radicals as their graphic similarity. Furthermore, his work mentions very little about either the derivatives in each radical section, or the socio-cultural contexts they express.

Harbsmeier and Bottéro (2008) discuss some general principles of the *Shuō wén*'s character arrangement. Relevant to my own study is their discussion of the influence of numerological principles on Xǔ Shèn's radical system, and the philosophical agenda underlying parts of Xǔ Shèn's work.¹⁸ Also, they point out that derivatives within radical sections are often grouped in semantic series, which they demonstrate through the 心 *xīn* 'heart, mind' radical.¹⁹ In studying the organization of derivatives in radical sections, I rely on the same basic idea, applying it to different radical sections, and demonstrating in more detail how characters in one series relate to each other, forming distinct groups. However, I disagree with Harbsmeier and Bottéro's statement that the arrangement of characters within radical sections is "often erratic and generally unpredictable, [... but] not always arbitrary."²⁰ My own analysis seems to confirm almost the opposite, namely that it

¹⁷ Serruys 1984: 657.

¹⁸ Harbsmeier and Bottéro 2008: 257-258.

¹⁹ Harbsmeier and Bottéro 2008: 259-60.

²⁰ Ibid.

is generally well organized, but occasionally unpredictable and (seemingly) arbitrary. Furthermore, given that it was in line with the contemporary “science” to systematize things according to *yīn-yáng* and five phases (五行 *wǔxíng*) theories, and to establish a cosmological worldview, the degree it can be called “erratic” is debatable.

Wilkinson (2015) also briefly discusses radical arrangement. He similarly highlights the influence of Hàn numerology and cosmology on Xǔ Shèn’s arrangement of radicals and derivatives, and mentions that the character arrangement contains both graphic and semantic considerations. Discussing the selection of derivatives, Wilkinson, based on Dǒng (2007), briefly outlines the 一 *yī* radical as an example wherein the selection of derivatives is clearly done through both graphic and semantic considerations. In my analysis, I confirm Wilkinson and Dǒng’s interpretation, but provide a more comprehensive investigation of the radical section, including several ideas, such as the connecting Xǔ Shèn’s arrangement in the 一 *yī* radical to specific contemporary philosophical doctrines, not mentioned by Wilkinson and Dǒng.

Regarding Xǔ Shèn’s conception of writing, important contributions are Bottéro (2002), Yáo (1995), Lewis (1999), and O’Neill (2010). In my analysis, I will discuss the issue of how Xǔ Shèn understood writing against the background of my analysis of three radical sections. Among the above scholars, my position differs most from O’Neill, who seems to assert that early Chinese philologists, such as Xǔ Shèn, understood writing primarily as a record of speech.²¹

Despite the extensive literature on the *Shuō wén*, some of the organizational principles behind it are still not satisfactorily understood. Consequently, we still do not fully understand the reasoning behind its organization. This is partly because Xǔ Shèn only occasionally explicitly mentions the principles and ideas he drew upon when compiling his work. This fact, together with a historical gap of almost 2,000 years separating the text from the present, makes the *Shuō wén* a difficult text for modern readers. Nevertheless, some of these implicit principles might have played an important role for Xǔ Shèn as he was compiling the text, and a proper understanding of the *Shuō wén* must include explications of these principles. Existing scholarship, both modern and classical, is somewhat deficient concerning these issues. Few systematic attempts have been made to explicate Xǔ Shèn’s rationale behind the work, and to point out some of the ideas and customs that influenced his text’s structure and content. Filling this gap is the basic motivation for this study. In my work, I attempt to uncover some of the cultural factors that informed Xǔ Shèn’s text. In linking the original text to the customs and ideologies of its time, I offer an interpretation of how the philosophical thoughts and cultural customs inform the selection, arrangement, and explanation of characters in the text.

²¹ See O’Neill 2010: 314, and throughout chapter 2.

The central question of my study is: What are the organizational principles of radical sections in the *Shuō wén*? Furthermore, I will explore (a) how do they relate to the Hàn culture in which Xǔ Shèn lived, and (b) what do they suggest about Xǔ Shèn's conception of writing?

1.3 Methodology and objectives

Since the text is over one hundred thousand words long, an in-depth analysis of the *Shuō wén* is far beyond the scope of an MA thesis. Therefore, a selection has to be made. My analysis is a qualitative study of the following three radical sections: 一 *yī* 'oneness, origin', 示 *shì* 'spiritual matters', and 玉 *yù* 'jade'.

For the selection of these three radicals, a brief survey was conducted, covering the *Shuō wén*'s first 30 radicals. Of these 30 radicals, the above three were selected as the most relevant to this thesis. One central question explored herein is the relationship between the *Shuō wén* and early Chinese culture, especially Hàn dynasty culture. Therefore, radical sections that, in the initial survey, appeared to be most culturally significant were prioritized. What is meant here is that some radicals, and most of their derivatives, are explained by Xǔ Shèn in terms that do not appear to reveal much about contemporary Chinese customs and worldviews. For example, 艸 *cǎo* 'grass', which is radical no. 12, mostly contains names of plants, flowers, grains, and vegetables. This is similar to modern dictionaries. Therefore, the 艸 *cǎo* section, although containing enough material for studying the text's organizational principles, is considered less relevant for exploring the text's contemporary socio-cultural relevancy.

Conversely, 一 *yī*, 示 *shì*, and 玉 *yù* all have certain features connecting them closely to the Chinese culture of the time. For example, 一 *yī* is explained in highly cosmological terms, and the small number of derivatives subsumed under it, combined with a short glance at Xǔ Shèn's explanations of them, suggests that they were all specifically selected to express a cosmological scheme, one closely connected to Hàn dynasty philosophy. Similarly, the 示 *shì* and 玉 *yù* sections have very discursive radical explanations, incorporating philosophical elements. 示 *shì* is glossed as 'what heaven reveals to man', and 'spiritual matter', clearly relating to the contemporary religious culture; the 63 characters subsumed thereunder relate to and reflect this religious culture. 玉 *yù* 'jade' is explained as a symbol of virtue, revealing something specific about the Chinese understanding of jade, and its 126 derivatives already hint at the richness of early China's jade culture, and their explanations are likely to tell about this culture.

For these reasons, these three radicals each represent something unexpected for many modern readers. They are schematized so that they are closely connected to their respective cultural

fields, such as cosmology, religious culture, and jade culture. In my initial survey of 30 radicals, the radicals 三 *sān* and 王 *wáng* were also considered to be equally culturally significant as 一 *yī*, 示 *shì*, and 玉 *yù*. Both 三 *sān* and 王 *wáng* are explained in philosophical terms, quite contrary to expectations from characters whose basic meanings are ‘three’ (三 *sān*) and ‘king’ (王 *wáng*). 三 *sān*, however, has no derivatives whatsoever. Therefore, it is less suitable for studying character arrangement. Also, 王 *wáng* has only two derivatives, providing too little material for studying character organization. Nevertheless, 三 *sān* and 王 *wáng* are arranged between 示 *shì*, and 玉 *yù*. Therefore, they still contribute by providing contextual understanding of 示 *shì*, and 玉 *yù*, and explicating the philosophical setting wherein they should be understood. Therefore, they will, to some degree, also be considered in my analysis.

The aim of my study is to understand Xǔ Shèn’s organizational rationale. I attempt to reconstruct Xǔ Shèn’s thinking, to better understand why his text looks the way it does. In doing so, I hope to increase our understanding of early Chinese lexicography and some of its central issues. As we shall see, the organization of the *Shuō wén* provides an important key for understanding how Xǔ Shèn understood the nature of writing. In addition, it also provides a window into Hàn dynasty worldviews, and how these worldviews were integrated with and advocated through the organization and analysis of the script.

2. The 一 *yī* section

The first radical of the *Shuō wén* is 一 *yī*, five characters are listed under it: 一 *yī*, which is the radical itself, and the derivatives 元 *yuán*, 天 *tiān*, 丕 *pī*, and 吏 *lì*. With just one horizontal stroke, 一 *yī* is one of the simplest characters of the Chinese script, making its position at the beginning of the dictionary only logical. However, the selection of 一 *yī* and its four derivatives to comprise the first section of the book, is not just a matter of simplicity or stroke counts, but deeply reflective of Hàn dynasty philosophy.

2.1 The 一 *yī* radical

一²² : 惟初太始， 道立於一， 造分天地， 化成萬物。凡一之屬皆从一。

一 *yī*: The inception of the Great Beginning (太始 *tàishǐ*). The Way (道 *dào*) is established upon 一 *yī*. It divides Heaven and Earth and forms the ten thousand things. Every character subsumed under 一 *yī* is derived from 一 *yī*.²³

Xǔ Shèn begins his dictionary in highly philosophical terms. As a philosophical concept, 一 *yī* may refer to a state of undifferentiated unity, the oneness before duality.²⁴ Xǔ Shèn calls this the 太始 *tàishǐ* ‘Great Beginning’ (some versions have 太極 *tàijí* ‘Great Ultimate’), referring to the original unity of all things, a state of oneness before the cosmogonic *yīn-yáng* separation.²⁵ To better understand the place of Xǔ Shèn’s explanation in the intellectual life of his time, we must understand some of the related cosmological thoughts that prevailed during the Hàn dynasty.

To this end, a highly influential text of the Hàn dynasty was the *Yì jīng*.²⁶ The *Yì jīng* was originally a manual for divination but, in the late Warring State period (475-221 BC.) and early Hàn dynasty, the book was transformed into a philosophical text through adding a series of commentaries to the original text, commonly known as the “Ten Wings”.²⁷ These commentaries were given canonical status during the reign of Emperor Wǔ of Hàn (also known as Hàn Wǔdì, r. 141-87 BCE), and the *Yì jīng* as a whole (i.e. the original divination text plus the ten commentaries)

²² The lemmas are written in the so-called ‘small seal script’ (小篆 *xiǎozhuàn*), which was the basis of Xǔ Shèn’s analysis.

²³ Xǔ 1963: 7.

²⁴ Zhāng Dàinián 2014: 109.

²⁵ For more info, see for example Yao 2003: 590-91; Fung 1952: 383-384.

²⁶ Henderson (in Cua) 2003: 192.

²⁷ Henderson (in Cua) 2003: 192; Lewis 1999: 242.

was given first place among China's classics.²⁸ After the Hàn dynasty, it played an important part in the development of Chinese cosmology, science, and medicine.²⁹ In one of the ten commentaries, the so-called *Appended statements* (*Xì cí*), is the following passage:

易有太極，是生兩儀，兩儀生四象，四象生八卦。

In the *Changes* (*yì*) there is the Great Ultimate (*tàijí*), which produced the two forms (*yīn-yáng*), the two forms produced the four images (four seasons), which again produced the eight trigrams.³⁰

As noted above, *tàijí*, like *tàishǐ*, refers to the primordial unity of the world, the foundation upon which the two complementary principles (or forces) *yīn-yáng* interact, which generates the four seasons (Spring, Autumn, Winter, and Summer). This in turn generates the so-called eight trigrams (八卦 *bā guà*), which are ideographic symbols used in the *Yì jīng* used to represent different objects or principles of nature.³¹ From the eight trigrams, the myriad of objects evolve. This sentence describes a cosmological process of creation alike what Xǔ Shèn himself describes above, and might have inspired Xǔ Shèn's cosmological ideas.³²

Another text which might have informed Xǔ Shèn's explanation of 一 *yī* is the *Huáinán zǐ*, a text to which Xǔ Shèn wrote a commentary. The *Huáinán zǐ*, although mainly Daoist in nature, was adopted by Hàn dynasty Confucians to expand their cosmological ideas.³³ In it, we find the following cosmogonic account:

天墜[地]未形，馮馮翼翼，洞洞濶濶，故曰太昭。道始生虛廓，虛廓生宇宙，宇宙生氣。

When Heaven and Earth were not yet shaped, it was amorphous, vague, a blank, a blur; call it therefore 'the Primal Beginning'. The Way began in the tenuous and transparent, the tenuous and transparent generated Space and Time, Space and Time generated the *qì*.^{34 35}

Like *Yì jīng*, the *Huáinán zǐ* describes a cosmogonic process very similar to Xǔ Shèn's explanation of 一 *yī* above.

²⁸ Shaughnessy (in Loewe) 1993: 216.

²⁹ Henderson (in Cua) 2003: 192.

³⁰ *Xì cí shàng*. My interpretation follows Graham 1989: 360.

³¹ For example, ☰ *qián*, representing Heaven, and ☲ *lí*, representing fire.

³² For further details on this passage, see Gāo Hēng 1998: 403–404.

³³ De Bary 1999: 346.

³⁴ The concept 氣 *qì* is here left untranslated; it has been variously translated as 'vital force', 'material force' etc. It is a fundamental concept in Chinese cosmology and metaphysics. Its connotations vary from the spirit or life force of living creatures, to the air or ether permeating the universe, in some contexts it refers to the basic stuff or substance of all creation. See for example Cheng (in Cua) 2003: 615–617.

³⁵ *Huáinán zǐ* chapter 3. English translation by A.C. Graham, with the author's modifications.

Cosmological speculations of the kind above were characteristic Hàn dynasty thinking, setting the period apart from philosophical thoughts of earlier times.³⁶ Hàn thinkers were especially engaged in constructing a correlative cosmology linking man and society to the cosmos.³⁷ The basic theoretical framework for this was the *yīn-yáng* and the Five Phases³⁸, which were used to explain everything from cosmology to politics and human relations. Given this, it should be unsurprising that Xǔ Shèn decides to start his dictionary in the way he does, linking his lexicographic system to cosmology, following the philosophies of his time.

2.2 元 *yuán*

元: 始也，从一，从兀。

元 *yuán*: origin. It derives from 一 *yī* and 兀 *wù* ‘high and flat’.³⁹

Although one of the meanings the character 元 *yuán* in classical texts was ‘origin’, Xǔ Shèn’s main reason for glossing it so was probably not to provide practical guidance for the reading of texts, but to establish a semantic link to 一 *yī*. Philosophically, 元 *yuán*, like 一 *yī*, denotes a condition of oneness prior to the separation of *yīn-yáng*. According to Hàn dynasty thinker Dǒng Zhòngshū (ca 179 - ca 104 BCE), who contributed significantly to the emergence of Hàn Confucianism,⁴⁰ 元 *yuán* is a primordial source from where all things derive. He writes:

惟一元者，大始也 [...] 惟聖人能屬萬物於一而擊之元也 [...] 元猶原也 [...] 故元者為萬物之本。

What is called the one origin (元 *yuán*) is the Great Beginning [...] Only the sage is capable of relating the many to the one and thus linking them to the origin. [...] This origin is like a source. [...] Therefore, the origin is the root of all things.⁴¹

³⁶ Graham 1989: 313.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ The Five Phases (五行 *wǔ xíng*) is a scheme of five concepts used in Chinese philosophy to describe a wide array of phenomena, ranging from the human body, to politics and cosmology. The five phases are 木 *mù* ‘wood’, 火 *huǒ* ‘fire’, 土 *tǔ* ‘earth’, 金 *jīn* ‘metal’, and 水 *shuǐ* ‘water’.

³⁹ Xǔ 1963: 7.

⁴⁰ Loewe (in Yao) 2003: 191.

⁴¹ Dǒng 2010: 46, 102.

As a contemporarily influential thinker, Dǒng Zhòngshū might very well have influenced Xǔ Shèn's conception of concepts such as 一 *yī* and 元 *yuán*. As we shall see below, Xǔ Shèn did draw upon Dǒng Zhòngshū's philosophy in explaining certain characters in his book.

Since 元 *yuán*, like 一 *yī*, signifies 'origin', 一 *yī* is followed by 元 *yuán* in Xǔ Shèn's arrangement. Consequently, when Xǔ Shèn states that 元 *yuán* derives from 一 *yī*, it most likely means that both the meaning and structure of 元 *yuán* are derived from 一 *yī*. "Derives from" (从 *cóng*), in this case, does not simply refer to the number one, nor simply to a graphical relationship between the top horizontal stroke in 元 *yuán* and the stroke comprising 一 *yī*. Indeed, many characters are graphically connected to 一 *yī* (i.e. they have a horizontal stroke in their character structure), but were not subsumed under the 一 *yī* radical. Since 元 *yuán* relates, both graphically and semantically, to 一 *yī*, it was subsumed under this radical. Additionally, because of the close philosophical relationship between the two characters (being both cosmogonic), it was listed directly after 一 *yī*.

2.3 天 *tiān*

天: 顛也。至高無上，从一，大。

天 *tiān*: it means top (顛 *diān*). It is the highest point where nothing can rise above. It derives from 一 *yī* and 大 *dà* ('great').⁴²

天 *tiān*, often translated as 'Heaven', is an important concept in Chinese philosophy. In the *Yì jīng*, 天 *tiān* is linked to the trigram ☰ *qián*, which, with its three unbroken lines, represents the pure *yáng*, which is the positive, generative principle in nature.⁴³ The *Appended statements*, mentioned above, says:

乾知大始。

Qián (Heaven) directs the Great Beginning.⁴⁴

⁴² Xǔ 1963: 7.

⁴³ Fung 1952: 386.

⁴⁴ *Xìcí shàng*.

Considering *Yì jīng* philosophy's influence on the Hàn dynasty, it is perhaps unsurprising that we find 天 *tiān* subsumed under the 一 *yī* radical. Given the cosmogonic significance of 天 *tiān* in the *Yì jīng*, the link to the preceding characters 一 *yī* and 元 *yuán* is very close in that they are all primordial stages or principles in the cosmogonic process.

Similarly, in the numerology outlined in the *Yì jīng*, different numbers are ascribed to Heaven and Earth, seemingly based on the above principle that “Heaven directs the Great Beginning”. It reads:

天一地二

Number one belongs to Heaven, number two belongs to Earth.⁴⁵

As we have seen above (see Section 1), the numerology of the time did influence Xǔ Shèn's organization of radicals. It presumably also played a role in the subsumption of 天 *tiān* under 一 *yī*.

2.4 丕 *pī*

𠂇

𠂇：大也。从一不聲。

丕 *pī*: it means great. It derives from 一 *yī* and 不 *bù* is phonetic.⁴⁶

Xǔ Shèn understood the meaning of 丕 *pī* as derived from 一 *yī*. For him, there seems to be a semantic link between ‘origin’ and ‘vast, great’. From an ontological perspective, 一 *yī*, the primordial origin of all things, is an all-embracing, encompassing and pervading the ten thousand things. Hence, for Xǔ Shèn, the meaning ‘great’ probably derived naturally from the meaning ‘origin’, referring to the boundlessness characterizing the universe's origins. This way, 丕 *pī* maintains a semantic (and graphic) link to the radical. As for the connection between 丕 *pī* and the preceding character 天 *tiān*, it is worth recalling Duàn Yùcái's remark above (see Section 1.2): “There is nothing greater than 天 *tiān* (‘Heaven’)! Thus, it is followed by 丕 *pī* (‘great’)”. Xǔ Shèn possibly thought of 丕 *pī* as an attribute of 天 *tiān*, and therefore placed it thereafter.

⁴⁵ *Xìcí shàng*.

⁴⁶ Xǔ 1963: 7.

2.5 吏 *lì*

吏

：治人者也。从一从史，史亦聲。

吏 *lì*: one who governs people. It derives from 一 *yī* and 史 *shǐ* ('scribe'), 史 *shǐ* is also phonetic.⁴⁷

In the Hàn period, 吏 *lì* referred to low-level government officials, such as clerks. Of the four characters subsumed under the 一 *yī* radical, it is most enigmatic. Owing to its upper horizontal stroke, 吏 *lì* has a graphic connection to 一 *yī*. There appears, however, to be no semantic link between the two characters: 吏 *lì* has no cosmological significance that could link to the meaning of 一 *yī*. Therefore, it is unclear why Xǔ Shèn chose to include 吏 *lì* in the group of characters subsumed under the first radical. As previously noted, many characters having a graphical connection to 一 *yī* (i.e. they have a horizontal stroke in their graphical structure), were excluded from this radical. Thus, the decision to include 吏 *lì* was certainly not arbitrary; he could very well have subsumed it under the 史 *shǐ* 'scribe' radical (no. 78), to which it has both a graphical and semantic connection.

The above analysis suggests that the preceding three characters 一 *yī*, 元 *yuán*, 天 *tiān*, and 丕 *pī* are connected to 一 *yī*, both graphically and semantically. Therefore, we can assume that Xǔ Shèn's choice to subsume 吏 *lì* under 一 *yī* was based on both graphical and semantic considerations. The preceding four characters (一 *yī*, 元 *yuán*, 天 *tiān*, and 丕 *pī*) and the contemporary intellectual currents contextually suggest, with their emphases on cosmological speculations and the correspondence between the cosmos and man, that Xǔ Shèn included 吏 *lì* under this radical to connect the cosmological principles of 一 *yī* to the human realm, represented by 吏 *lì*. This links the lexicographic system to the so-called doctrine of the unity of heaven and man (天人合一 *tiān rén hé yī*), which was prevalent in the Hàn dynasty. The aforementioned Hàn scholar Dǒng Zhòngshū states:

天人之際，合而為一。

The border of Heaven and man is united as one.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Xǔ 1963: 7.

⁴⁸ Dǒng 2010: 208.

In Dǒng Zhòngshū's philosophy, the doctrine of the unity of heaven and man mainly presents itself through series of correspondences and resonance between man and the cosmos. For example, the social and moral order of society was ultimately derived from a corresponding order in Heaven – which is perhaps best understood here as 'cosmos' or 'nature' – and is therefore naturally enforced. Dǒng Zhòngshū goes even further, surmising that humankind's physical appearance is based on numerical categories of nature. For example, the 360 joints in the human body correspond to the number of days in a year, human breath is like the wind, the human head is round like the domed Heaven, the feet are flat like the Earth.⁴⁹ Similarly, the way in which officials, such as 吏 *lì*, govern human society, is also based on natural principles of Heaven.

In his Sòng dynasty commentary, Xú Kǎi explains the relationship between 吏 *lì* and 一 *yī*:

吏之理人，心主于一也，故从一。

When the officials govern the people, they maintain oneness (一 *yī*) in their hearts, thus 吏 *lì* derives from 一 *yī*.

Following Xú Kǎi, officials' internal attitudes are related to the principle of 一 *yī*, which explains the subsumption of 吏 *lì* under 一 *yī*. From Xǔ Shèn's explanation of 一 *yī*, it seems that 一 *yī* is similar in meaning to *dào* ("dào is established upon 一 *yī*"). *Dào* (the Way) is not only descriptive of the world, but also (perhaps more importantly) denotes a normative principle for living. It is plausible that Xǔ Shèn's concept of 一 *yī* also goes beyond the mere descriptive level of describing a cosmogonic process. It is possible that it was also intended to be a prescriptive tool, providing cosmological support for contemporary moral principles, indicating how officials and rulers should behave and cultivate themselves. They must both know of and conform to heavenly principles, externally and internally. The subsumption of 吏 *lì* in the current radical section represents the linking of 天道 *tiān dào* 'Heavenly Way' to the 人道 *rén dào* 'human way', i.e. expressing the doctrine of the unity of Heaven and man. In sum, I suggest that Xǔ Shèn's thinking goes as follows: *Dào* governs the cosmos and nature, rulers and officials govern society; the human Way is derived from the heavenly Way, akin to how the character 吏 *lì* is derived from 一 *yī*.

The above analysis shows how deeply Xǔ Shèn embedded cosmological ideas into his lexicographic system. This raises interesting questions about Xǔ Shèn's conception of writing, and suggests that he thought of the script as a graphic representation of the cosmos, with individual

⁴⁹ Deborah Summer (in Yao) 2003: 614.

characters linked to natural objects or principles. This is discussed in more detail within the conclusion.

To give the reader a better picture of the distinctiveness of Xǔ Shèn's 一 yī section, and how it differs from modern Chinese dictionaries, appendix 1 provides a sample of the 一 yī section of a modern dictionary.

3. The 示 *shì* section

The 示 *shì* section contains 63 characters. This section's central theme is sacrificial culture, which is revealed through many of its entries. Xǔ Shèn's explanations contain rich information on religious life, which is helpful for understanding how Xǔ Shèn organized and elucidated characters in this section. Below, I look at the arrangement and explanation of characters and how such relates to early China's the religious culture.

3.1 The 示 *shì* radical

示 *shì*, the third radical in Xǔ Shèn's scheme of 540 radicals, is explained by him as follows:

𠄎: 天垂象，見吉凶，所以示人也。从二，三垂，日月星也。觀乎天文，以察時變。示，神事也。

示 *shì*: Revelation from Heaven, seen as auspicious or inauspicious signs, by which [the will of Heaven] is revealed to men. It is derived from 二 [上] *shàng*. The three vertical lines represent the sun, the moon, and the stars. [The ruler] must be watchful of the signs of heaven, in order to understand the changes of the four seasons. 示 *shì* denotes spiritual matters.⁵⁰

This explanation of 示 *shì* mirrors Hàn ideas about Heaven and cosmological resonance. According to John Henderson, in Hàn times it was believed that certain beings and phenomena in nature, (such as heavenly bodies, winds and rains, plants and animals) would respond favorably to good governments and unfavorably to bad governments. In the case of sustained bad governments, Heaven, which is here understood as a deity, would issue portents to warn the rulers of the calamity that would ensue unless they improved their government.⁵¹ This so-called theory of resonance between Heaven and man (天人感應 *tiān rén gǎn yìng*), although found to some extent in the *Yi jīng*, was developed most prominently by the aforementioned Hàn thinker, Dǒng Zhòngshū. He writes:

帝王之將興也，其美祥亦先見；其將亡也，妖孽亦先見。

When the rise of a ruler is about to come, auspicious signs are first revealed; when the fall of a ruler is at hand, bad omens first appear.⁵²

⁵⁰ Xǔ 1963: 8.

⁵¹ Henderson (in Cua) 2003: 190.

⁵² Dǒng 2010: 269.

The similarity between Dǒng Zhòngshū and the explanation of 示 *shì* above, both concerning the will of Heaven revealed through auspicious and inauspicious signs (such as unusual events in nature), suggest that Xǔ Shèn's explanation was informed by the Hàn doctrine of resonance between Heaven and man.⁵³

Deserving attention is Xǔ Shèn's last remark in the explanation of 示 *shì*: “示 *shì* denotes spiritual matters”. This remark seems to be an attempt to establish a semantic link between the radical and derivatives of the 示 *shì* section. Almost all the characters in the 示 *shì* section relate to sacrifice culture (i.e. they relate to concepts concerning spiritual matters).

Xǔ Shèn's placement of 示 *shì* as the third radical is best understood by considering the preceding two radicals, 一 *yī* and 上 *shàng*. 上 *shàng*, written “上” in small seal script (on which Xǔ Shèn's analysis is based) is graphically related to 一 *yī* through its horizontal base stroke. In Xǔ Shèn's analysis, the upper part “二” of 示 *shì*, which resembles the character 二 *èr* ‘two’, is here an old form of 上 *shàng* ‘above’.⁵⁴ Thus, the three characters 一 *yī*, 上 (二) *shàng*, and 示 *shì* are related by virtue of their graphic structure.

However, Xǔ Shèn alluding to semantic connections between these three radicals is also likely. Xú Kǎi attempts to explicate the semantic relation between them:

一，天地之始也。一氣之化也。天先成而地後定。天者，上也，故次之以上。在上者，莫若天。二，古文上字，垂三光以示人，故次之以示。

一 *yī* is the origin of Heaven and Earth. It is the transformation of the one *qì*. Heaven was completed first and Earth assumed shape thereafter. Heaven (天 *tiān*) means high, therefore, it is followed by 上 *shàng* (‘above’). As for that which is above, Heaven stands unrivaled. “二” is the old form of 上 *shàng*, it sends down three lights so as to reveal [the will of Heaven] to people. Therefore, 上 *shàng* is followed by 示 *shì* (‘reveal’).⁵⁵

Xú Kǎi seems to see Heaven (天 *tiān*) as the recurring feature in these three radicals. To him, it connects their meanings, making it a logical sequel, not only graphically but also semantically. In my view, Xú Kǎi's interpretation of Xǔ Shèn's arrangement is strong in this regard. The great concern Xǔ Shèn shows for cosmological speculations in the 一 *yī* section contextually suggests

⁵³ This is also the conclusion of Chinese philologist Lí Qiānjū (2013: 32).

⁵⁵ Xú Kǎi 1987: 299.

that cosmology also played a part in the organization of these three radicals, which is the focus of Xú Kǎi's interpretation.

3.2 Arrangement of derivatives

In total, 63 characters are subsumed under the 示 *shì* radical. Many of these characters are grouped in semantic series. There are, nonetheless, some omissions of characters from these series — characters that would be expected in a series but appear elsewhere under the 示 *shì* section. My analysis groups characters mainly based on connections to sacrificial culture. This highlights how characters in one series form a distinct group, and shows their connections to the entire radical section. Due to the large number of characters in the 示 *shì* section, I cannot explain all characters in all series. Rather, for each series, I provide one to a few examples so as to illustrate the topic of that series.⁵⁶ The serial order of series and characters in series below corresponds to Xǔ Shèn's text:

3.2.1 Series 1: the objective of sacrifice

禮 *lǐ*, 禧 *xī*, 禋 *zhēn*, 祿 *lù*, 禡 *sī*, 禔 *zhēn*, 祥 *xiáng*, 祉 *zhǐ*, 福 *fú*, 祐 *yòu*, 祺 *qí*, 祗 *zhī*, 禋 *zhī*.

This is a relatively coherent group, with characters representing the goal of sacrificial performance: to bring people good fortune. The fact that all the characters express positive meanings indicates Xǔ Shèn's principle of grouping positive terms at the beginning of a radical section. This principle is probably a primary reason for this series being at the beginning of the section. The first character in the series is 禮 *lǐ*:

禮  : 履也。所以事神致福也。从示从豊，豊亦聲。

禮 *lǐ*, conduct. It is what is used to serve the spirits, so as to bring about good fortune. It derives from 示 *shì* and 豊 *lǐ* 'a ritual vessel', 豊 *lǐ* is also phonetic.⁵⁷

禮 *lǐ* is a central Confucian concept, its meaning being very broad. It translates as 'ritual', 'rites', 'customs', 'etiquette', 'propriety', etc.⁵⁸ It covers a wide spectrum of social habits and rules that

⁵⁶ No general principle governs my selection here; the main idea is that any character in a given series could be illustrative of the topic of that series. In some cases, however, priority have been given to characters which contain significant information about sacrifice culture, or characters that do not seem to fit the series wherein they are grouped, and therefore require explanation.

⁵⁷ Xǔ 1963: 7.

guide proper actions. For example, the Warring State philosopher 荀子 Xúnzǐ (ca 313 - ca 238 BCE) mentions “songs and laughter, weeping and lamentation...rice and millet, fish and meat... the wearing of ceremonial caps, embroidered robes, and patterned silks, or of fasting clothes and mourning clothes” as different aspects of 禮 *lǐ*.⁵⁹

In Xǔ Shèn’s entry, it likely refers to sacrificial rites. Xǔ Shèn could have explained 禮 *lǐ* in many ways, following any of its meanings, yet chose an explanation which invokes sacrifice performance. This is especially clear from the passage: “It is what is used to serve the spirits, so as to bring about good fortune”. A principal way of serving the spirits was through sacrifice. Xǔ Shèn’s explanation semantically links 禮 *lǐ* and the radical 示 *shì*; this link would be muddled if Xǔ Shèn chose instead to emphasize another aspect of 禮 *lǐ* unrelated to sacrifice, such as those mentioned by Xúnzǐ above.

Another example from this group is:

禛
禛：以真受福也。从示真聲。

禛 *zhēn*, to use sincerity to receive blessings. It derives from 示 *shì*, and 真 *zhēn* is phonetic.⁶⁰

Xǔ Shèn’s explanation of 禛 *zhēn* reflects a Confucian understanding of 禮 *lǐ*. When practicing any sacrifice or other rites, inner attitude and sincerity surpasses external forms in importance. This is expressed in the Confucian text *Lún yǔ*, as:

祭如在，祭神如神在。

Sacrificed [to the ancestors] as if they are present. Sacrifice to the spirits as if the spirits are present.⁶¹

This suggests that the *Lún yǔ* reflects a Confucian understanding of 禮 *lǐ* that was prevalent in Xǔ Shèn’s time. Namely, that only with sincerity in one’s heart can sacrifice be properly performed and blessings be obtained, completing the objective of sacrifice.

福
福：祐也。从示畐聲。

⁵⁸ Ames and Rosemont 1998: 51.

⁵⁹ Watson 1967: 101.

⁶⁰ Xǔ 1963: 7.

⁶¹ *Lún yǔ* 3.12.

福 *fú*, divine protection. It derives from 示 *shì*, and 畐 *fú* is phonetic.

Following Xǔ Shèn, 福 *fú* is no pedestrian happiness, it comes from divine intervention; it is something favored by the spirits. Therefore, 福 *fú* is rendered here as ‘blessing’.

Initially, some of the characters in this series may seem rather unconnected to 示 *shì*. However, the characters are probably best understood in relation sacrifice, namely to the happiness, blessing etc. that comes from properly performing sacrifice or other religious rites. Since Heaven reacts to humans’ conduct, people’s happiness and fortune are often intrinsically linked to their spiritual behavior.

According to Qīng scholar Huáng Kǎn, some of the characters in my first series are grouped together, not because of their semantic connections, but because of their phonetic similarity, being either homophones or near-homophones. The first examples given by Huáng Kǎn are: 禛 *zhēn*, 禛 *zhēn*, 祗 *zhī*, and 禋 *zhī*.⁶² As can be seen from the character order in this series (provided above), only 祗 *zhī* and 禋 *zhī* follow in direct succession. Between 禛 *zhēn* and 禛 *zhēn* are the characters 祿 *lù* and 禡 *sī*. The fact that these two are not grouped next to each other seems to contradict Huáng Kǎn’s idea that they are arranged via phonetic similarity. According to Axel Schuessler’s phonological reconstructions, the late-Hàn reading of 禛 *zhēn* and 禛 *zhēn* are ʈiɛŋ and tʂin respectively.⁶³ As such, phonological reconstructions give only limited support to Huáng Kǎn’s interpretation (ʈiɛŋ and tʂin are quite different) — their semantic connection appears stronger than the alleged phonetic one. 祗 *zhī* and 禋 *zhī* are reconstructed as: 祗 tʂe and 禋 tʂe, showing that they were homophones during the Hàn dynasty. Xǔ Shèn glosses 禋 *zhī* as “safety and blessing”⁶⁴, which is an obvious objective of sacrifice performance. Conversely, 祗 *zhī* is glossed as “respectfulness”⁶⁵, which is less related to the objective of sacrifice. Rather it concerns how sacrifices should be performed. It is, therefore, possible that this character was grouped within this series mainly because of its phonetic connection with the character 禋 *zhī*, and not primarily because of its semantic affiliation with the group as a whole.

Huáng Kǎn’s other examples of characters being phonetically arranged in this series are 祉 *zhǐ*, 福 *fú*, 祐 *yòu*, 祺 *qí*.⁶⁶ The late Hàn reconstructions of these characters are as follows: 祉 tʰjə^B, 福 puk, 祐 wu^C, 祺 giə. These reconstructions do not support Huáng Kǎn’s interpretation. I see,

⁶² Huáng 1964: 18.

⁶³ My Hàn reconstructions in this thesis are all based on Schuessler 2009.

⁶⁴ Xǔ 1963: 7.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Huáng 1964: 18.

therefore, no reason to surmise the organizational principle of these characters as phonetic rather than semantic.

3.2.2 Series 2: spirits of worship

神 *shén*, 祇 *qí*, 祕 *mì*.

There are two general worshipped subjects: spirits or deities (神 *shén*) and ancestors (祖 *zǔ*). The three characters in this series represent the former group.

𡗗

，天神，引出萬物者也。从示、申。

神 *shén*, spirit of heaven. That which brings forth the myriad of things. It derives from 示 *shì* and 申 *shēn*.⁶⁷

Xǔ Shèn here refers to the supreme deity of Heaven. Contextually, 神 *shén* can be understood as an aspect of 天 *tiān* (Heaven). As in the above analysis of 一 *yī*, 天 *tiān* was an important concept in Chinese cosmology. The Chinese philosopher Fēng Yǒulán (also written Fung Yu-lan) schematizes five different meanings of 天 *tiān* in early Chinese writings, one of them being 天 *tiān* as the supreme deity.⁶⁸ It seems Xǔ Shèn combines different meanings of 天 *tiān* throughout his dictionary. As an object of worship, as in this context, 天 *tiān* most likely refers to a deity. To Xǔ Shèn, this deity was responsible for spawning the ten thousand things, which could correspond to the phase of 天 *tiān* in the cosmological scheme outlined in the 一 *yī* section above. 神 *shén* can also be found under the gloss for 祕 *mì*, which semantically linking the two characters.

Xǔ Shèn glosses 祇 *qí* as “deity of earth”⁶⁹, and it seems to be the earthly counterpart to 神 *shén*. Another deity closely related to this group is 社 *shè* ‘deity of the soil’. Xǔ Shèn explains it as “lord of the soil.”⁷⁰ For some reason, he does not group 社 *shè* together with 神 *shén* and 祇 *qí*, instead placing it as the 55th character at the end of the 示 *shì* section.

⁶⁷ Xǔ 1963: 8.

⁶⁸ Fung 1952: 31.

⁶⁹ Xǔ 1963: 8.

⁷⁰ Xǔ 1963: 9.

3.2.3 Series 3: rules and ceremonies of sacrifice performance

齋 *zhāi*, 禋 *yīn*, 祭 *jì*, 祀 *sì*, 柴 *chái*, 禩 *lèi*.

This series contains characters representing some ceremonies and customs related to sacrifice, and provides information about sacrificial performance.



：戒，潔也。从示，齊省聲。

齋 *zhāi*: to purify and cleanse [one's character]. It derives from 示 *shì*, and 齊 *zhāi* is reduced phonetic.⁷¹

齋 *zhāi* refers to the ceremonial self-purification before performing religious rituals. According to Paul Kroll, it includes purging the body and mind by various prescribed methods, such as bathing, fasting, and meditation. This was done to express solemn respect towards the subjects of worship.⁷²

Another entry in this series provides some details about the actual forms and venues of sacrifices:



：燒柴焚燎以祭天神。从示此聲。《虞書》曰：「至于岱宗，柴。」

柴 *chái*, to burn firewood and burn [offerings] to sacrifice to the spirit of Heaven. It is derived from 示 *shì* and 此 *cǐ* is phonetic. The *Yú shū* says: on reaching Dàizōng⁷³ [Shùn] performed a 柴 *chái* sacrifice.⁷⁴

According to Xǔ Shèn, 柴 *chái* refers to a burnt sacrificial offering to Heaven. Firewood is to be arranged then lit, thereupon the offering was placed, the smoke carrying it to Heaven. Tàishān (Mount Tai), called Dàizōng by Xǔ Shèn, became one of the principal places where the Hàn dynasty emperor would pay homage to heaven.⁷⁵

This semantic series is less homogenous than the previous two. Some entries describe the inner and outer purification done in preparation for the actual sacrifice, while some others describe

⁷¹ Xǔ 1963: 8.

⁷² Kroll 2014: 589.

⁷³ Another name for 泰山 Tàishān.

⁷⁴ Xǔ 1963: 8.

⁷⁵ Lewis 1999: 108.

specific methods or aspects of sacrificial practice. Broadly, Xǔ Shèn's entries in this series describe ceremonies, rules and methods of sacrificial practice.

According to Huáng Kǎn, the characters 祭 *jì*, 祀 *sì*, and 禋 *chái* are grouped based on phonetic rather than semantic principles.⁷⁶ The Hàn reconstructions of these three characters are: 祭 *tsias*, 祀 *zi*, 禋 *dze*. This shows that there was some phonetic similarity between them in the Hàn dynasty, especially between 祀 *zi*, 禋 *dze*. It is possible that this is why Xǔ Shèn grouped these three characters in succession. However, I consider the semantic connection at least equally strong. 祭 *jì* is glossed as “sacrifice” and 祀 *sì* is glossed as “to continuously perform sacrifices”.⁷⁷ Thus, the three characters 祭 *jì*, 祀 *sì*, and 禋 *chái* are semantically connected to the meaning ‘sacrifice’, which fits in the context of this series. This was probably the main reason for them being grouped together. The fact that they also have phonetic connections might have been a secondary reason.

3.2.4 Series 4: ancestral worship

禘 *guǐ*, 祫 *fù*, 祖 *zǔ*, 禋 *bēng*, 祫 *gào*, 祫 *shí*.

These characters relate to those of the second series since some of them also refer to subjects of worship. However, the characters in this series comprise an independent group in that they concern the meaning of ancestral worship. Therefore, we can assume that Xǔ Shèn sequences them.

禘: 祫、禘，祖也。从示危聲。

禘 *guǐ*, 祫 *fù* and 禘 *guǐ*, is to displace the ancestral tablets. It derives from 示 *shì* and 危 *wēi* is phonetic.⁷⁸

As indicated in Xǔ Shèn's gloss, 禘 *guǐ* is closely related to 祫 *fù* which, probably for that reason, is the next character:

祫: 後死者合食於先祖。从示付聲。

⁷⁶ 1964: 18.

⁷⁷ Xǔ 1963: 8.

⁷⁸ Ibid. My interpretation follows Tāng 1997: 13.

祔 *fù*, [to displace the ancestral tablets of] newly deceased ancestors [into the ancestral temple], and provide them with offerings along with the other ancestors. It derives from 示 *shì* and 付 *fù*.⁷⁹

The two characters 祔 *guǐ* and 祔 *fù* both refer to displacing ancestral tablets into a new temple or shrine. The tablets were placards used to designate the seat of a deity or past ancestor. Worshippers believed the tablets embodied the spirits of their ancestors or deities. Therefore, they made offerings at the tablets.

Most characters in this group are clearly connected to ancestor worship, requiring little explanation. The only character not glossed in terms directly related to ancestor worship is 禘 *gào*. Xǔ Shèn writes:

禘: 告祭也。从示从告聲。

禘 *gào*, the announcing (告 *gào*) sacrifice. It derives from 示 *shì*, and 告 *gào* is phonetic.⁸⁰

禘 *gào* refers to the sacrificial ritual used by the emperor as he leaves the central palace. Before departing, he would perform a sacrifice to the ancestors and announce his intended journey.⁸¹ Concerning the place of 禘 *gào* in this group of characters relating to ancestor worship, Duàn Yùcái has an interesting remark:

自禘以下六字皆主言祖廟。故知告祭謂王制天子諸侯將出，造乎禘。

Under all the six characters following upon 禘 *guǐ* [Xǔ Shèn] mainly speaks about ancestral temples. Thus, we know that [Xǔ Shèn's gloss] 'the announcing sacrifice' is the royal regulation [that says] when the son of heaven and feudal lords was about to leave, they should perform the 造 *zào*⁸² sacrifice at the altar of their deceased father.⁸³

禘 *gào*, like the remaining five characters, is also closely related to ancestor worship.

⁷⁹ Xǔ 1963: 8. My interpretation follows Tāng 1997: 13.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Tāng 1997: 14.

⁸² Originally, 禘 *gào*, 告 *gào*, and 造 *zào* were all one character. In classical texts, we therefore sometimes find 告 *gào*, and 造 *zào* used as a variant of 禘 *gào*, which is the case here.

⁸³ Duàn 1981: 4.

The above four series comprises approximately the first half of the 示 *shì* section. The second half is less structured. Nonetheless, the following three groups comprise the fifth, sixth, and seventh series.

3.2.5 Series 5: sacrifices bound to a specific time or season

祠 *cí*, 祫 *yue*, 禘 *dì*, 祫 *xiá*.

Xǔ Shèn explains this series' first two characters as the sacrifice of spring and summer, respectively.⁸⁴ The remaining two characters, 禘 *dì* and 祫 *xiá*, refer to major sacrifice ceremonies performed every few years:

禘: 諦祭也。从示帝聲。《周禮》曰：「五歲一禘。」

禘 *dì*: carefully performed sacrifices. It derives from 示 *shì*, and 帝 *dì* is phonetic. The *Zhōu lǐ* says: “Every five years there is one 禘 *dì* sacrifice.”⁸⁵

祫: 大合祭先祖親疏遠近也。从示、合。《周禮》曰：「三歲一祫。」

祫 *xiá*, [to perform] a great united sacrifice to ancestors near and distant. It derives from 示 *shì* and 合 *hé*. *Zhōu lǐ* says: “every three years there is one 祫 *xiá* sacrifice.”⁸⁶

禘 *dì* refers to a grand sacrifice ceremony, wherein rulers submitted to founding ancestors in their lineage. Both the 禘 *dì* and the 祫 *xiá* were major ceremonies where all the ancestral tablets of the ruler's lineage were united in a collective sacrifice.⁸⁷ This is likely why Xǔ Shèn grouped them alongside each other. As they relate to specific times, they follow the characters for spring and summer sacrifices.

3.2.6 Series 6: prayers and sacrifice to avert calamity or misfortune

禱 *liù*, 祓 *fú*, 祈 *qí*, 禱 *dǎo*, 禱 *yòng*, 禱 *ráng*.

⁸⁴ Xǔ 1963: 8.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Wáng Níng 2000: 29.

This series is similar to the first one, representing the goal of sacrificial performance, the difference being that the first series focuses on positive aspects (obtaining good fortune), whereas this series focuses on negative aspects (averting misfortune). However, Xǔ Shèn glosses both 祈 *qí* and 禱 *dǎo* as “seek blessings”⁸⁸; they would, therefore, perhaps fit better into the first series. The remaining characters express the goal of sacrifice and prayers negatively, in terms of what to avert. For example:



禳 *yòng*: 設縣蕪為營，以禳風雨、雪霜、水旱、癘疫於日月星辰山川也。从示，榮省聲。

禳 *yòng*, to lay out silk thread and twine it to enclose [an area for sacrificial purposes], [to pray to the spirits of] the sun, moon, and stars; and [the spirits of] mountains and streams, to avert the calamities of wind and rain, snow and frost, floods and droughts, and pestilence and plague. It derives from 示 *shì*, and 榮 *róng* is reduced phonetic.⁸⁹

The Chinese believed various spirits could influence certain natural forces, allaying calamities such as droughts, floods, and unusual weather patterns.⁹⁰

3.2.7 Series 7: words of inauspicious meaning

禍 *huò*, 祟 *suì*, 褻 *yāo*, 禁 *jìn*, 禪 *dàn*.

This is the last series of the 示 *shì* section, represented by characters with negatively charged meanings. This series’s positioning represents one of Xǔ Shèn’s main organizational principles for arranging derivatives, namely to group characters of positive meanings at the beginning and group characters of negative meanings at the end.

The five characters in this series mainly express ideas of misfortune caused by not serving the spirits correctly — for example, unnatural patterns in nature — as well as certain mourning rites. An example of an entry is:



禍 *huò*: 害也，神不福也。从示咎聲。

⁸⁸ Xǔ 1963: 8.

⁸⁹ Xǔ 1963: 8, my interpretation follows Tāng 1997: 19.

⁹⁰ Wáng Níng 2000: 28.

禍 *huò*, disaster. The spirits do not bless [the people]. It derives from 示 *shì* and 咎 *guō* is phonetic.⁹¹

If human conduct disobeyed cosmic principles and the will of certain deities, calamity would follow. Xú Kǎi comments on the entry 禍 *huò* saying:

禍者，人之所召也，神因而附之，故洪範起於三德五事。五事不善，則致六極。

Disasters are summoned by people, the spirits add in response to them. Therefore, the *Hóng Fàn*⁹² starts with the three virtues⁹³ and the five (personal) matters⁹⁴. If the five (personal) matters are not well cultivated, the six extreme evils⁹⁵ will come about.⁹⁶

This once again highlights the importance of cultivating inner virtues and just conduct. Following Xǔ Shèn and Xú Kǎi's explanations of 禍 *huò*, this was no trivial matter. It was important to please the spirits and maintain a harmonious relationship between the heavenly and earthly realms, which, as we have seen, were understood to be closely connected during the Hàn dynasty.

Other characters in this series include 禘 *yāo*, explained as 'abnormal thing', resulting from the crops behaving abnormally — a bad omen; and 禫 *dàn* which is the final character of the 示 *shì* section, explained as a mourning period's concluding sacrifice.⁹⁷

Beyond the six semantic series above, we find many characters scattered throughout the second half of the radical section, ungrouped into any series. These include names for different types of sacrifices, sacrificial procedures and ritual items used in sacrifice. The characters not grouped into any series are: 衤 *bǐ*, 裸 *guàn*, 褌 *cui*, 祝 *zhù*, 禴 *guì*, 禪 *shàn*, 禦 *yù*, 祐 *huó*, 禡 *méi*, 禴 *xǔ*, 禪 *shèn*, 禡 *gāi*, 禡 *mà*, 禡 *dǎo*, 社 *shè*, 禡 *yáng*, 禡 *jìn*. The only two characters not explained in relation to sacrifice culture and rites are 祐 *hù*⁹⁸ and 禡 *suàn*.

⁹¹ Xǔ 1963: 9.

⁹² *Hóng fān* chapter of the *Shàng shū*.

⁹³ Refers to: 正直 *zhèngzhí* 'correctness and straightforwardness', 剛克 *gāngkè* 'strong rule', and 柔克 *róukè* 'mild rule'.

⁹⁴ Refers to: 貌 *mào* 'bodily demeanour', 言 *yán* 'speech', 視 *shì* 'seeing', 聽 *tīng* 'hearing', 思 *sī* 'thinking'.

⁹⁵ Refers to: 凶短折 *xiōng duǎn zhé* 'misfortune shortening the life'; 疾 *jí* 'sickness'; 憂 *yōu* 'distress of mind'; 貧 *pín* 'poverty'; 惡 *è* 'wickedness'; 弱 *ruò* 'weakness'.

⁹⁶ Xú Kǎi 1987: 4.

⁹⁷ Xǔ 1963: 9.

⁹⁸ 祐 *hù* is the name of a deceased emperor of the Hàn dynasty. Xǔ Shèn does not gloss these characters, but always places them first among the derivatives in a radical section and writes 上諱 *shàng huì*, 'taboo because of the emperor'.

Three general observations summarize the above analysis. Firstly, we see how philosophical speculations informed the explanation of the radical, and probably also its position. The position of the 示 *shì* radical as the third one, is probably related to, or an extension of, the cosmological scheme established in the 一 *yī* section. Secondly, in the arrangement of derivatives, we see how most characters are grouped together in semantic series, based on their connection to sacrifice culture and rites. However, we also see how some characters are grouped more arbitrarily (namely all those ungrouped in any series), and how, occasionally, phonetic principles seem to have played a minor role in the organization. Thirdly, the 示 *shì* section provides ample information about Hàn customs and worldviews. Such as the origin of the world, the importance placed on inner virtues in the performance of sacrifice, the names and procedure of specific sacrifices, etc. Although some of these ideas and customs were not exclusive to the Hàn dynasty, prevailing from before that time, the fact that Xǔ Shèn mentions them suggests that they, to some degree, prevailed in his time.

4. The 玉 *yù* section

The 玉 *yù* ‘jade’ section contains 126 characters, all related to different aspects of jade and jade culture. The number of characters listed under 玉 *yù* testifies to jade’s importance in early China. This section provides rich insight into the jade culture of early China.

4.1 The 玉 *yù* radical

玉 *yù* is the sixth radical in Xǔ Shèn’s scheme of 540 radicals, it follows upon the radicals 三 *sān* ‘three’ and 王 *wáng* ‘king’. He explains it as:

王: 石之美。有五德：潤澤以溫，仁之方也；鰓理自外，可以知中，義之方也；其聲舒揚，專以遠聞，智之方也；不撓而折，勇之方也；銳廉而不技，絜之方也。象三玉之連。丨，其貫也。凡玉之屬皆从玉。

玉 *yù*: the most beautiful of stones. It has five qualities: it is glossy and smooth, thereby it is softening, this is comparable to benevolence (仁 *rén*); from its grains and patterns on the outside, one can know its inside, this is comparable to righteousness (義 *yì*); its sound rises smooth and clear, when spread it can be heard from far away, this is comparable to wisdom (智 *zhì*); it does not bend, but breaks off, this is comparable to courage (勇 *yǒng*); it is sharp-edged yet not harmful, this is comparable to integrity (潔 *jié*). The character resembles three pieces of jade connected together. The vertical line (丨) is the string. All characters subsumed under 玉 *yù* are derived from 玉 *yù*.⁹⁹

Xǔ Shèn here makes an analogy between the natural qualities of jade and five Confucian virtues. A reason for this can probably be found in the cultural context of his time. In the Hàn dynasty, Confucianism became the dominant school of thought, officially sponsored by the state.¹⁰⁰ It was, therefore, important to promote and justify Confucian ideas, such as the Confucian system of virtues. One way of doing that was to link the virtues to properties of natural objects. An example similar to Xǔ Shèn’s account above can be found in the *Hán shī wàizhuàn*, written in the Western Hàn dynasty:

首戴冠者，文也；足搏距者，武也；敵在前敢鬪者，勇也；得食相告，仁也；守夜不失時，信也。

⁹⁹ Xǔ 1963: 10.

¹⁰⁰ Chi-yun Chen (in Cua) 2003: 83.

[As for the rooster,] On its head he wears a cap, this represents civil culture (文 *wén*). His legs are equipped with spurs, this represents martial qualities (武 *wǔ*). Faced with an enemy, he dares to fight, this represents courage (勇 *yǒng*). When he obtains food, he calls the other, this represents benevolence (仁 *rén*). When he keeps watch at night, he is always on time, this represents trustworthiness (信 *xìn*).¹⁰¹

This suggests that analogies between virtues and natural objects were relatively common in the Hàn dynasty. As such, being distinguished by its beauty and soft sheen, jade naturally became a symbol of virtues. This conception of jade goes back to earlier times.¹⁰² However, according to geologist and jade expert Hé Sòng, due to the Confucianism's dominance during the Hàn dynasty, it became one of the most distinguished features of Hàn jade culture. More than before, jade became symbols of the ruler and the exemplary person (君子 *jūnzǐ*), who were supposed to cultivate and manifest Confucian virtues.¹⁰³ Xǔ Shèn's explanation of the 玉 *yù* radical is a reflection of this symbolic significance of jade.

As for Xǔ Shèn's positioning of the 玉 *yù* radical, it seems to be determined by the preceding two radicals 三 *sān* 'three' and 王 *wáng* 'king'. 三 *sān* is explained as:

三: 天地人之道也。从三數。

三 *sān*: the way of Heaven, Earth, and man. It derives from three counting lines.¹⁰⁴

It represents the transition and evolution from Heaven – which was the main focus of the radicals 一 *yī*, 上 *shàng*, and 示 *shì* – to the trinity of Heaven, Earth, and man, known as 三才 *sān cái* 'three powers, three realms', whence the ten thousand things arise. The ruler was Heaven's societal representative, ultimately responsible for maintaining earthly adherence to cosmic principles. It is explained as:

王: 天下所歸往也。董仲舒曰：古之造文者，三畫而畫其中謂之王。三者，天、地、人也，而參通之者王也。孔子曰：一貫三為王。

王 *wáng*: that which all people under heaven submit to. Dǒng Zhòngshū said: "when the ancient people created characters, the character for 'king' (*wáng* 王) was formed by three [horizontal] strokes and one [vertical] stroke connecting them together. The three horizontal strokes represent Heaven, Earth, and

¹⁰¹ *Hán shī wàizhuàn* chapter 2.

¹⁰² It is recorded both in the *Xúnzǐ* and the *Lǐjì* that both ascribe this understanding of jade to Confucius.

¹⁰³ Hé 2007: 59.

¹⁰⁴ Xǔ 1963: 9.

man. The vertical stroke represents the king.” Confucius said: “the one that connects the three is the king.”¹⁰⁵

Jade was believed to integrate the essences of Heaven and Earth, linking humans to spirits.¹⁰⁶ Like the ruler, jade was mediating between Heaven, Earth, and man. Accordingly, there was clearly both semantic and graphic links between 三 *sān*, 王 *wáng*, and 玉 *yù*. Xú Kǎi explains the relation between these three, including the transition from 示 *shì*:

示者三光也，故次之以三。通三才而後為王，故次之以王。玉者，君子所以比德也，天地之精也，王者所服用也，故次之以玉。

示 *shì* is made up of three lights, therefore, it is followed by 三 *sān* (‘three’). [He who] connects Heaven, Earth, and man becomes the king, therefore, 三 *sān* is followed by 王 *wáng* (‘king’). Jade is what the exemplary person use to make comparisons with virtue, it is the essence of Heaven and Earth, it is worn by the ruler, therefore, 王 *wáng* is followed by 玉 *yù* (‘jade’).¹⁰⁷

Given the cosmological context provided by the first three radicals, as well as Xǔ Shèn's explanations of 三 *sān*, 王 *wáng*, and 玉 *yù* in philosophical terms. It seems very likely that Xú Kǎi's interpretation approaches Xǔ Shèn's intention. By arranging the first six radicals according to the cosmological order of Heaven, Earth, and man, Xǔ Shèn lays the foundation from which to proceed to more ordinary matters, which all arise after the three primary realms have been established.

4.2 The Arrangement of derivatives

Similar to the 一 *yī* and 示 *shì* sections above, the derivate arrangement in the 玉 *yù* section is highly conscious, with a number of semantic series structuring the text. It is nonetheless not free from inconsistencies, with characters unpredictably appearing throughout. Here, I group the 126 characters in the 8 major series; the order of these groups and characters corresponds to Xǔ Shèn's text. As was the case in the 示 *shì* sections, for each series, I provide one or a few examples to illustrate the topic of that series.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Xǔ 1963: 9.

¹⁰⁶ Gump 1962: 15, 58.

¹⁰⁷ Xú 1987: 299.

¹⁰⁸ Here I follow the same principle as in the 示 *shì* section. See note under 5.2.

4.2.1 Series 1: different types of jade

璚 *liáo*, 瓘 *guàn*, 璚 *jǐng*, 璚 *tiǎn*, 璚 *náo*, 璚 *lì*, 璚 *fán*, 璚 *yú*, 璚 *jīn*, 璚 *yú*, 璚 *hóng*, 璚 *lái*, 璚 *qióng*, 璚 *xiàng*, 璚 *là*, 璚 *xún*, 璚 *lù*, 璚 *zàn*, 璚 *yīng*, 璚 *wú*, 璚 *xiù*, 璚 *xuán*, 璚 *qiú*, 璚 *lín*.

In this series, most characters are glossed as some type of jade. For example:

璚
璚: 玉也。从玉奈聲。

璚 *liáo*: jade. It derives from 玉 *yù*, and 奈 *liáo* is phonetic.¹⁰⁹

璚
璚: 赤玉也。从玉夔聲。

璚 *qióng*: red jade. It derives from 玉 *yù*, and 夔 *xiòng* is phonetic.¹¹⁰

Within the first series, a few incongruent characters are found. Most obviously 璚 *qiú*, which is glossed as “The sound of jade”¹¹¹. It would fit better into Series 5 below.

4.2.2 Series 2: ceremonial jade objects

璧 *bì*, 瑗 *yuàn*, 環 *huán*, 璜 *huáng*, 琮 *cóng*, 琥 *hǔ*, 璚 *lóng*, 琬 *wǎn*, 璋 *zhāng*, 琰 *yǎn*, 玠 *jiè*, 瑒 *chàng*, 璚 *huán*, 琕 *tǐng*, 瑁 *mào*.

Jade often played a role in certain rites and ceremonies. This group’s characters all denote certain ritual jade objects. For example:

璧
璧: 瑞玉圓也。从玉辟聲。

璧 *bì*: a jade insignia [of rank], it is round. It derives from 玉 *yù*, and 辟 *pì* is phonetic.¹¹²

璧 *bì* is a flat round jade disc with a hole in the center. There were many functions and meanings associated with 璧 *bì*, such as its use in the sacrifice to Heaven.¹¹³ 璧 *bì* was also used by

¹⁰⁹ Xǔ 1963: 11.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Lú 2004: 5.

officials and the emperor upon meeting each other, symbolizing their rank. According to archeologist Lú Zhàoyìn, 璧 *bì* was the primary object used for this purpose in the Eastern Hàn dynasty (in which Xǔ Shèn lived), and it seems to have been one of its main functions at that time.¹¹⁴ Perhaps for this reason, Xǔ Shèn's explanation invokes this usage of 璧 *bì*.

Another artifact in this series is 璫 *lóng*:

璫: 禱旱玉。龍文。从玉，从龍，龍亦聲。

璫 *lóng*: Jade used in prayers to avert droughts. It has the pattern of a dragon. It derives from 玉 *yù* and 龍 *lóng*, 龍 *lóng* is also phonetic.¹¹⁵

Here is an example of jade's use as a medium bridging humans and spirits. In ancient beliefs, dragons were associated with water; they were believed to be rulers of water and bringers of rain.¹¹⁶ Therefore, dragons carved into jade objects were used ritualistically to avert droughts.

4.2.3 Series 3: jade used as ornaments

璹 *jiǎo*, 珩 *héng*, 玦 *jué*, 珥 *ěr*, 璫 *tiàn*, 琫 *bēng*, 珌 *bì*, 璫 *zhì*, 瑤 *zhāo*, 瑑 *zhuàn*, 珎 *zǔ*, *qí*, 璫 *zǎo*, 瑯 *liú*.

This group contains many jade ornaments. For example:

璹: 玉佩。从玉，敖聲。

璹 *jiǎo*: jade pendant. It derives from 玉 *yù* and 敖 *jiǎo* is phonetic.¹¹⁷

Jade was used ornamentally to symbolize power and status. Different jade ornaments denoted social standing, helping people avoid class and rank transgressions.¹¹⁸ For example:

璫: 佩刀上飾。天子以玉，諸侯以金。从玉奉聲。

¹¹⁴ Lú 2004: 5.

¹¹⁵ Xǔ 1963: 11.

¹¹⁶ Werner 1961: 286.

¹¹⁷ Xǔ 1963: 11.

¹¹⁸ Yu Ming 2011: 20.

琫 *běng*: an ornament on the waist-sword. The emperor use jade, officials use gold. It derives from 玉 *yù*, and 奉 *fèng* is phonetic.¹¹⁹

As we can see, jade was more precious than gold in early China.

4.2.4 Series 4: processing jade

琢 *zhuó*, 琯 *diāo*, 理 *lǐ*.

This short series has three characters, all glossed as “to process jade”, referring to processes such as carving, and polishing. For example:

理: 治玉也。从玉，里聲。

理 *lǐ*, to process jade. It derives from 玉 *yù* and 里 *lǐ* is phonetic.¹²⁰

Jade was indistinguishable from common stones until processed by a skilled craftsman. According to the commentary of Duàn Yùcái, 理 *lǐ* originally referred to unprocessed jade’s grains, or patterns. Processing pieces of jade involved reshaping them based on their natural patterning.¹²¹

4.2.5 Series 5: the sound of jade

玲 *líng*, 琤 *qiāng*, 玎 *dīng*, 琤 *chēng*, 瑣 *suǒ*, 琤 *huáng*, 球 *qiú*.

The six serialized characters are all glossed as “the sound of jade”, referring to the sound of jade being struck. Emitting a crisp and satisfying sound when struck, jade was also used as a musical stone.¹²² For example:

琤: 玉聲也。从玉，倉聲。

琤 *qiāng*: the sound of jade. It derives from 玉 *yù* and 倉 *cāng* is phonetic.¹²³

¹¹⁹ Xǔ 1963: 12.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Duàn 1988: 15.

¹²² Yu Ming 2011: 5.

¹²³ Xǔ 1963: 12.

According to Yu Ming, an expert on Chinese jade, officials in early China often carried jade pendants, which reminded them of their call to self-cultivation. The pendants knocked together as their wearers walked, creating a melodious sound, which compelled the wearer to walk and behave in a correspondingly graceful manner.¹²⁴

4.2.6 Series 6: stones resembling jade

瑀 yǔ, 珙 bàng, 玲 jiān, 璽 lè, 琚 jū, 琇 xiù, 玖 jiǔ, 珉 yí, 琅 yín, 璵 yì, 璆 zǎo, 璒 jīn, 璿 zēn, 璠 cōng, 璫 hào, 璿 xiá, 璵 wàn, 璿 xiè, 珣 gōu, 琕 yán, 璿 jìn, 璒 wéi, 璵 wǔ, 璒 méi, 璿 dēng, 珎 sī, 珣 yú, 璵 mò, 璿 xié, 璒 bì, 璒 kūn, 璒 mín, 璒 yáo.

This series contains many characters. Most are explained as stones resembling jade. For example:

璵: 石之似玉者。从玉，禹聲。

璵 yǔ: a stone that resembles jade. It derives from 玉 yù and 禹 yǔ is phonetic.¹²⁵

4.2.7 Series 7: various jewels and gems

珠 zhū, 玢 dì, 璵 lì, 玢 pín, 璒 lì, 璒 yáo, 璒 méi, 璒 guī, 璒 jī, 璒 láng, 玢 gān, 璒 shān, 璒 hú, 璒 liú.

This series is similar to the previous one. Here we find different gems, jewels, pearls and other precious stones. For example:

璒: 珠也。从玉比聲。

璒 pín: a pearl. It derives from 玉 yù, and 比 bǐ is phonetic.¹²⁶

4.2.8 Series 8: characters associated with inauspicious meanings

璒 hán, 璒 yǒu.

¹²⁴ Yu Ming 2011: 21.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Xǔ 1963: 13.

Although this series contains just two characters, I group them as separate series, following one of Xǔ Shén's major organizational principles: to group characters with unfavorable meanings at the end of a radical section. Both 琰 *hán* and 璵 *yǒu* refer to jade used in funeral rites. For example:

琰: 送死口中玉也。从玉从含，含亦聲。

琰 *hán*: jade put in the mouth of the dead upon the funeral. It is derived from 玉 *yù* and 含 *hán*, 含 *hán* is also phonetic.¹²⁷

From ancient times, it had been popular to put a jade piece in the mouth of the deceased before burial, providing deceased ancestors with “eternal food”. This custom had an important place in Hàn funeral rites, it was believed that jade could prevent the deceased's body from decaying.¹²⁸

As in the 示 *shì* section, between the above eight series, we find scattered characters that do not form any coherent groups. A few of these characters would fit well into some of the above series. For example, 瑞 *ruì* is glossed as “to use jade as an authenticating object.”¹²⁹, which fits into the context of the second series, and yet for some reason Xǔ Shén does not include it there. The characters not grouped into any series are: 瑛 *yīng*, 球 *qiú*, 玩 *wǎn*, 珍 *zhēn*, 璫 *shú*, 璫 *léi*, 璫 *cuǒ*, 玼 *cǐ*, 璫 *sè*, 璫 *lì*, 璫 *yíng*, 璫 *mén*, 瑕 *xiá*. 璫 *shú* and 璫 *léi*, 瑞 *ruì*, 璫 *dàng*, and 璫 *líng*.

To summarize the above analysis, the position of the 玉 *yù* radical is largely decided by the preceding two radicals 三 *sān* and 王 *wáng*, to which it is both graphically and semantically related. These three radicals build upon the cosmological scheme initiated by the first three radicals (一 *yī*, 上 *shàng*, and 示 *shì*). In the arrangement of derivatives, the 玉 *yù* section has a similar organization to the 示 *shì* section in that it is divided into a number of semantic series. Characters in these series provide rich information about Hàn dynasty jade culture, including some ceremonial usages of jade, its function of distinguishing people of different ranks, its use in funeral rites, etc. However, as was the case in the 示 *shì* section, we find several characters outside of these series, and some characters that would be expected in a certain series are found elsewhere under in the section. Given the elaborate explanation of the radical in terms of Confucian virtues, it is remarkable that this symbolic meaning of jade is not mentioned in his explanation of any of the derivatives. In a sense, this makes the connection between the radical and the derivatives slightly weaker than in the case of 一 *yī* and 示 *shì*.

¹²⁷ Xǔ 1963: 12.

¹²⁸ Lú 2004: 7.

¹²⁹ Xǔ 1963: 11.

5. Conclusion

This study was set out to explore the organizational principles of the *Shuō wén*, how they relate to the Hàn culture, and what they reveal about Xǔ Shèn's conception of writing. The analysis of the above three radical sections shows that, in organizing characters, Xǔ Shèn considered a number of principles. The principles used to organize radicals differ to some degree from those used to organize derivatives.

Based on the explanation and positions of the three radicals 一 *yī*, 示 *shì*, and 玉 *yù*, analyzed above, I have tried to show that the organization of radicals is based both on semantic and graphic considerations. In the first group of six radicals (一 *yī*, 上 *shàng*, 示 *shì*, 三 *sān*, 王 *wáng*, and 玉 *yù*), each radical has a clear graphic connection to the preceding and/or following radical. However, while the graphic similarity between these characters is clearly one of their connecting principles, mentioned explicitly by Xǔ Shèn in the postface, this is not the sole reason for their arrangement. It seems that, for Xǔ Shèn, equally important as the graphic connections between radicals was to connect their meaning to his cosmological scheme. Placed first is 一 *yī* ‘beginning, unity’, which represents the primordial origin of the universe, it is the generative principle of nature. Following this comes 上 *shàng* ‘above’ and 示 *shì* ‘revelation from Heaven’, which relates closely to Heaven (天 *tiān*), understood both as a cosmic principle and as a deity which helps in the creation of all things; then comes 三 *sān* ‘three’ which represents the three realms of Heaven, Earth, and man and all the things therein; then comes 王 *wáng* ‘king’ and 玉 *yù* ‘jade’ which were both seen as mediators between Heaven, Earth, and man, linking humans to the spirits. Following this reasoning, Xǔ Shèn's purpose for the selection of these six radicals was likely to represent this cosmological process. Only after this can he proceed to radicals representing more worldly matters, such as 艸 *cǎo* ‘grass’ and 牛 *niú* ‘cattle’.

If Xǔ Shèn found the semantic connection between radicals so important, one might ask why he did not explicitly mention it in the postface.¹³⁰ As Harbsmeier and Bottéro have pointed out, the theories outlined in the *Shuō wén*'s postface and the body text are not always in concordance. For example, Xǔ Shèn defines and briefly discusses the 六書 *liù shū* ‘six principles of character formation’ in the postface, but inconsistently applies them in his structural analyses throughout the text.¹³¹ Therefore, even if Xǔ Shèn explicitly mentioned only the graphic principle for connecting radicals, we can expect deviation from this principle and the existence of other implicit principles.

¹³⁰ As we have seen (in Section 1.2), Wáng Jūn asserts that Xǔ Shèn did in fact state both the graphic and semantic principles in the postface, but this is a debatable interpretation of Xǔ Shèn's passage.

¹³¹ Harbsmeier and Bottéro 2008: 254.

As for the organization of derivatives, in the 一 *yī* section we find that cosmological principles also played an important role, similar to in the organization of radicals. In the 示 *shì* and 玉 *yù*, we find less emphasis on cosmological principles. Instead, characters are organized in semantic series, based on their connections to sacrifice culture, such as in the case of 示 *shì*, and jade, such as in the case of 玉 *yù*. The many series identified in the 示 *shì* and 玉 *yù* sections clearly show that Xǔ Shèn had a conscious idea behind the arrangement of most derivatives in these sections. However, we should be careful not to exaggerate the organization of derivatives. As the analysis shows, several characters are placed more arbitrarily, outside any of the semantic series. This suggests that Xǔ Shèn did not regard these series as strict categories.

Nevertheless, knowing these series helps us understand the meaning of Xǔ Shèn's entries and, to some degree, why he explained and arranged characters the way he did. For example, in the case of 禮 *lǐ* and 福 *fú* (see 5.2.1) seeing their semantic connection to the 示 *shì* radical and the first semantic series will help us better understand Xǔ Shèn's entries of these characters. Likewise, the context of 祫 *gào*, provided by the fourth semantic series (see 5.2.4), reveals that Xǔ Shèn's entry should be understood in relation to ancestor worship. To define characters in a way that fit them into a context was sometimes more important for Xǔ Shèn than defining them according to their common textual usage. For example, the main reason for glossing 元 *yuán* as 'origin' (see 4.2) was to semantically connect it to 一 *yī*, not to define its most common meaning in texts. This shows that making sense of the *Shuō wén* sometimes requires us to contextualize the entries, to see them in relation to the radical, and their possible connection to surrounding entries. Doing this helps us both understand the text, itself, and better use it as a reference work for classical texts.

As we have seen through many examples, the organization and explanation of characters in the above three sections, both radicals and derivatives, contain rich information about Hàn dynasty customs and worldviews. The organization of radicals is, itself, reflective of Hàn cosmology. It shows how the universe evolved from the state of unity represented by 一 *yī*, and subsequently evolved into *yīn-yáng*, the trinity of Heaven, Earth, and man, as well as the ten thousand things. A similar idea seems to be expressed in the organization of the 一 *yī* section alone. Here we find that the arrangement of characters, starting with the 一 *yī* radical and ending with 吏 *lì* 'official', seems to represent the doctrine of the unity of heaven and man (*tiān rén hé yī*). Organizing characters based on cosmological principles represents the general Hàn tendency of schematizing things according to the model of *yīn-yáng* and five phases (*wǔ xíng*).¹³²

A related doctrine of the Hàn dynasty was the theory of resonance between Heaven and man

¹³² For more information on this concept in Hàn philosophy, see Yiu-ming Fung (in Bo Mou) 2009: 272.

(*tiān rén gǎn yìng*, see 5.1 above). This theory includes the idea that phenomena of the same kind, or *qí*¹³³, attract one another (類同相召 *lèi tóng xiāng zhào*). Water, for example, is naturally attracted to damp places. Similarly, Xǔ Shèn wrote in the postface (see 1.1) “What is of the same branch is linked together, what is of the same principle is strung together.” By arranging characters of the same kind under one radical section, and grouping closely related characters in semantic series, Xǔ Shèn’s arrangement echoes this Hàn thinking of natural attraction. This suggests yet another link between Xǔ Shèn’s organization of the script and the Hàn worldview.

As mentioned under the analysis of the 一 *yī* section, Xǔ Shèn’s organization and explanation of characters raises interesting questions about his conception of writing. So what is writing, then, for Xǔ Shèn? The way he grounds the writing system in cosmic principles suggests that, for him, writing had a natural bond with reality. Xǔ Shèn likely did not think of writing as a record of speech, as today’s linguists, but rather primarily as a graphic representation of the cosmos.¹³⁴ This interpretation seems to fit well into a Hàn dynasty philosophical context. This is especially apparent because of two reasons. Firstly, the cosmic order was understood as a number of natural correlations between different things in nature (especially between the society and cosmos). For example, we have seen above how five Confucian virtues were linked to five natural properties of jade. And how Dǒng Zhòngshū saw a correlation between the human body and the numerical categories in nature. Numerical categories linked societal phenomena with the natural. Similarly, the writing system was seen as linked to, and ultimately derived from, nature. The *Shuō wén* is, in this context, a lexicographic expression of this correlative mode of thinking, wherein it was natural to link written characters to objects and natural principles, unmediated by spoken language.

Secondly, as we have seen, the study of the *Yì jīng* flourished in the Hàn, and had a significant influence on Xǔ Shèn. In the semiotic tradition of the *Yì jīng*, the basic symbols are the trigrams and hexagrams (see 4.1 above), which were understood as direct representations of objects or principles of nature.¹³⁵ Given the influence of the *Yì jīng* in the Hàn dynasty, it is probable that Xǔ Shèn adopted this idea for his understand of Chinese script.¹³⁶ Not only because doing so was the “science” of the time, but also because linking his text to an established classic would lent his arguments authority.¹³⁷ This suggests that the *Shuō wén*, while ostensibly a dictionary, functions more like an encyclopedic overview of the world. As Xǔ Shèn puts in the postface (see Section

¹³³ See note under section 4.1.

¹³⁴ On writing as a record of speech, for example, Ferdinand de Saussure writes, “Language and writing are two distinct systems of signs; the second exists for the sole purpose of representing the first”. For more info, see Saussure 1994: 23.

¹³⁵ Lewis 1999: 265.

¹³⁶ This idea is also supported by Lewis (1999: chapter 6).

¹³⁷ This way of supporting one’s argument by establishing a connection with an authoritative text was common in early China. See Galambos 2014: 50.

1.1), his organization of characters provides keys to investigating the origins (of things), knowing the transformations (of the world) and exhausting the mysteries (of the cosmos).

While practically limited in scope to mainly three radical sections, this study has attempted to provide a key for understanding the *Shuō wén*, keeping in mind a concept of the author's original intentions. The technique of blending graphical analysis with an understanding of the contemporary sociopolitical milieu can be generalized to glean more information from other parts of the text. Ultimately, Xǔ Shèn's *Shuō wén* suggests the intimate relationship that writers and thinkers have with their social surroundings. By considering both the text, itself, along with extrinsic factors surrounding its production, we can go beyond the pages, learning of the author's society, worldviews, and daily affairs. Doing so enriches both our experience of the text, itself, and our understanding of the collective human past.

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Appendix 1

To illustrate the distinctiveness of Xǔ Shèn's system of organization and how it differs from modern dictionaries, I am here providing a page of the radical index from a modern dictionary, the highlighted part shows the 一 yī section.

1	𠂇	417	(冊)°	130		622	秦°	1052	(釐)°	791	(呂)	1538
一部	𠂇	948	丘°	1066	尨	873	𡗗	461		1398	冉	1084
一	1521	𠂇	丛	218		888	恭°	455	(𠂇)°	1627	(冊)	130
一画		五	册°	130	来	768	𡗗	1593	(𡗗)°	1531	凹	13
二	345	(市)	丝	1228		七画	哥	436	𡗗°	584		1332
丁	303	市		五画	奉	394	𡗗°	439	𡗗°	434	半°	36
	1656	𠂇	(丟)°	309	武°	1382		802	𡗗°	935	出°	187
七	1014	卅	考°	728	表	86	𡗗°	935	𡗗°	1453	五至七画	
二画		不	老°	777	𡗗°	1290	夏°	1407	(𡗗)°	584	师	1171
三	1115	右°	共°	456	(長)°	144	十画以上		𡗗	934	曳	1520
千°	418	友°	亚	1491		1640	焉	1493		934	曲	1069
	424	牙°	亘	444	(亞)	1491	堇	675	𡗗°	270		1073
𠂇	196	屯	吏	799	其°	598	爽°	1217	2		肉°	1102
于	1584		再	1618		1017	(𡗗)	257	丨部		半°	893
亏	758	互	(互)	444	(來)°	768	𡗗°	1239	二至三画		县°	1414
才	117	丑°	在°	1619	(東)	309	(𡗗)°	1239	上°	1136	串	202
下	1403	四画		百	画	561	(𡗗)	1625		1137	非°	374
丈	1641	未	有°	1578	事	1187	棘	607	也°	1517	果	498
兀°	1370	未		1583	(兩)	811	𡗗	14	丰°	386	畅	150
	1383		而°	343	𡗗	1625	𡗗	72	韦°	1351	(局)°	494
与	1584	击°	死°	1231	(面)	898	𡗗°	1324	(𡗗)	1084	肃°	1240
	1588	戈	夹	414	𡗗	662	(𡗗)°	1414	中	1683	八画以上	
	1591	正		619	(並)°	94	𡗗°	770		1690	韭°	694
万	916			622	𡗗	605	(𡗗)°	1200	内	938	临	820
	1342	甘°	夷	1533		1028	𡗗°	6	(𡗗)°	299	禺	1586
上°	1136	世	尧°	1512	八画		(𡗗)°	1200	书°	1203	幽°	1571
	1137	冊	至°	1677	奏	1737	(𡗗)	344	四画		将°	641
三画		本	丞	166	毒°	319	(𡗗)°	1069	卡°	716		644
丰	386	(𡗗)	六画		甚	1155	𡗗°	617		1030		1041
𠂇	1017	(𡗗)	(𡗗)	1249		1158	𡗗°	1193	北°	54	艳°	1502
开	717	可°	严	1495	巷°	515	𡗗	252	凸	1315	(畢)	70
井	687		巫°	1372		1425	𡗗°	1627	旧	695	鼎°	306
天	1282	丙	求	1067	𡗗	631	𡗗°	1722	归°	487	(肅)°	1240
夫	396	左°	甫	403	歪	1333	(憂)°	1571	且	698	𡗗°	592
	397	丕	更	444	𡗗	64	(𡗗)°	1324		1049	(𡗗)°	592
元	1597	右°		446	面°	898	𡗗°	1288	甲	623	(暢)°	150
无°	913	布°	東	1210	𡗗°	1386	𡗗°	341	申	1151	冀°	617
	1372	平°	兩	811	𡗗	694	整°	1659	电	292	𡗗	90
韦°	1351	灭	丽	791	昼	1695	(賴)°	770	由	1572	3	
云	1610	东		800	九画		臻°	1654	史	1182	丿部	
专	1707	且°	(夾)°	414	艳°	1502	𡗗°	405	央	1504	一至二画	
		1049		619	泰°	1259	釐°	1394				

Source: 現代漢語詞典 *Xiàndài Hànyǔ Cídiǎn* (6th ed.)

All characters under the 一 yī section here are connected to 一 yī only by virtue of their graphic structures, all characters have a horizontal stroke as part of their structure. Possible semantic connections are not taken into account. Furthermore, the characters listed under 一 yī are grouped by their number of strokes, starting from those with fewest strokes and ending with those with the most. This type of arrangement is clearly intended to facilitate easy character retrieval. In contrast, Xǔ Shèn's organization of the 一 yī section is designed to serve his philosophical agenda, which is to link his organization of the script to cosmological principles.