

Looking for Chu people's writing habits

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LOOKING FOR CHU PEOPLE'S WRITING HABITS

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*Abstract*¹

After several decades of Chu manuscript discoveries, I believe that we now have sufficient material to study Chu people's writing habits, or what I will call here Chu *writers'* habits, with respect to their specific use of Chinese characters.² However, it still appears difficult to isolate any clear tendency in this regard within the corpus of Guodian or Shanghai Museum texts. Considering that these documents are probably the result of a succession of copies made by various people, possibly including non-Chu people, this paper suggests that a reflection on Chu writers' habits should first and foremost be based on documents entirely produced by Chu people, such as the Baoshan, Geling or Wangshan texts.

1. Introduction

As a result of the discoveries of the Guodian 郭店 and Shanghai Museum manuscripts, scholars have begun to pay more attention to the very complex situation of Chinese writing during the Warring States period. Debates have arisen about the very nature of the Warring States "script". One of the points frequently discussed is the question of the unity of Chinese writing during the Warring States period. On the one hand, most Chinese palaeographers claim that they can identify forms of Chinese script that differ from state to state. On the other hand, some scholars have pointed out that, even inside a given political and cultural area, we can find many "graphical variants", which are no less important than the ones taken by some in the first group as examples of differences be-

- 1 I would like to thank Grégoire Espeset, Crispin Williams and an anonymous reviewer for their corrections and suggestions. I am of course the only one to be held responsible for any errors that might remain in this paper.
- 2 I will in this paper use the word "writer" to mean "someone who writes" whatever this person is, whether an author or not, whether a professional scribe or not. In French, I would have used the neutral term "scripteur".

tween “regional writing systems”.³ This problem is partly related to the terminology used in Chinese publications. Scholars frequently use the term *wenzi* 文字 (“written characters”) as a synonym for “writing” (as a system), whereas a more explicit term also exists, even if it is only seldom used: *wenzi xitong* 文字系統 (“writing system”).⁴ Most of the studies on so-called “Chu writing” are, in fact, studies on Chu characters. However, recent studies suggest that we can also identify specific features in the use of some characters.⁵ I think both *specific graphical variants* and *specific uses of characters* can be included in what may be called “writers’ habits”.⁶ Ideally, research on “writers’ habits” should include everything related to the act of writing, including tools, writing medium, layout, punctuation, and characters.⁷ The present study will focus on characters.

Since the study of Chu writers’ habits is still at an early stage, I first wish to stress two points that might otherwise prevent us from getting a clear picture of these habits. These are: the way modern editors compile *wenzibian* 文字編 (“lists of characters”), and the general focus on excavated “literary texts”.

2. How Modern Editors Compile “Lists of Characters” (*wenzibian*)

Many *wenzibian* have been published, providing scholars with convenient and systematized access to characters from ancient manuscripts. Unfortunately, only some of them tend to be exhaustive, for example the *Zeng Hou Yi mu zhujian wenzibian* 曾侯乙墓竹簡文字編 (*List of characters from the bamboo slips from the tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng*) published in Taipei about a decade ago (see Fig. 1).⁸ Other *wenzibian* mostly present selections of characters considered by the editor to be significant. Such selections give the impression that all the selected forms displayed for a given character are equivalent, although some of them happen to be very rare in the manuscripts whereas others are common.

3 See, for example, LIN, 1997, and FALKENHAUSEN, 2006:264.

4 Concerning this problem, see also VENTURE, 2006:30–44.

5 See, for example, on the character 親, FENG, 2007: 290–291.

6 Some modern Chinese scholars now use the term *shuxie xiguan* 書寫習慣 (“writing habits”) to cover these different aspects.

7 We might also consider the expression of dates in Chu texts, where important events are used as references for years. (An analogous habit can be observed in several contemporary bronze inscriptions from Qi 齊.)

8 ZHANG/HUANG/TENG, 1997. For more recent similar and exhaustive character lists, see LI/QU/SUN, 2007, and CHENG, 2007.

Generally, an indication of the number of characters similar to the one reproduced in the list is supplied (e.g. 10 列, “ten occurrences”), but the overall impression differs completely from the experience of using tables as exhaustive as those in the *Zeng Hou Yi mu zhujian wenzibian*.

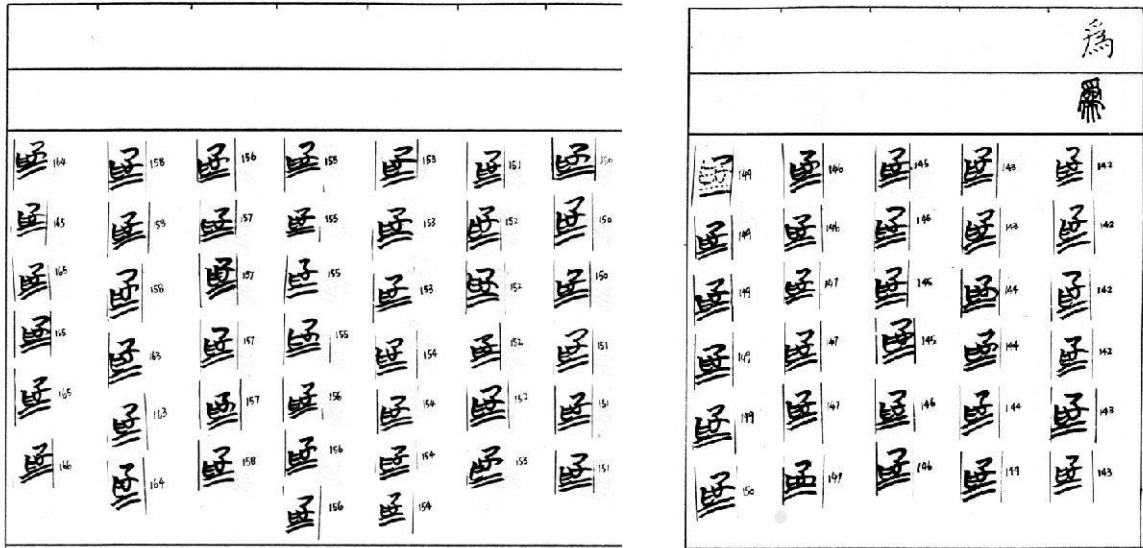


Fig. 1: The character *wei* 爲 in the Zeng Hou Yi documents (from ZHANG/HUANG/TENG, 1997:78–79).

Another shortcoming of current *wenzibian*, from the point of view of the present study, is that they generally rely on character *form* rather than character *use*. For example, the character *you* 酉 is often listed under an entry “*you* 酉” in *wenzibian*, and yet this ancient form is often used for *jiu* 酒 “alcohol” in Chu documents and not for *you* 酉, for which a distinct character exists. A notable exception, Li Shoukui 李守奎 classifies these two old characters in his *Chu wenzibian* 楚文字編 according to their meaning and not their form.⁹

Due to such problems, even though *wenzibian* are invaluable tools for the study of ancient Chinese characters, they must be employed with caution if one wants to get a clear understanding of the way characters were used in pre-imperial China.

9 LI, 2003:858–859. Concerning the character 酉, see also further on in this article.

3. The General Focus on Literary Texts

Scholars studying Warring States manuscripts tend to focus on literary manuscripts. This tendency is obvious in recent publications on bamboo slips texts.¹⁰ However, these texts, including literary and technical texts, those which Martin Kern calls “texts with a history”,¹¹ are never original documents but “copies of copies”. We know that every time a manuscript is copied, a number of textual modifications necessarily occur. The text as we have it hardly reflects the habits of a single person or even a single coherent group, but rather the habits of different people from different places, perhaps even from different regions and/or different periods. These textual strata are naturally very hard to identify, although some scholars have already published fruitful studies in this field. Reconstructing Chu writers’ habits from texts with such complex backgrounds is of course difficult.¹²

If we want to get a clearer picture of the “writing habits” of a group of people from a defined period, I believe that we should use documents not only copied, but entirely produced at that time by this group, such as the legal documents from Baoshan 包山, divination and ritual records from Wangshan 望山, or funeral inventories from the Changsha Chu tombs. On this basis, I will now offer some remarks on Chu writers’ habits as seen in these documents. Certain aspects of what follows have been dealt with separately by palaeographers, but I feel that a synthesis is necessary, and that we should regard every particular case as part of a broader and more complex phenomenon.

4. Some Remarks on Writers’ Habits in Chu Documents

Many authors stress the inconstancy in the use of Chinese characters during the Warring States period. I acknowledge that there was never a *standard writing system* as we understand the phrase today. There is no doubt that, as Imre Galambos writes, there was, at that time, quite a high degree of tolerance with regard to the use of variant characters. However, I am afraid that, due to the

10 See, for example, the topics of other papers in the present volume.

11 KERN, 2002:145–146.

12 Nevertheless, some scholars now claim to be able to identify characters copied by a Chu writer from a non-Chu manuscript. For a recent and rather convincing example, see FENG, 2008:250–327.

general focus on “literary texts”, this phenomenon is somewhat overestimated. The existence of, if not real rules, at least “common writing habits” in Chu texts can be observed at different levels.

4.1 *Personal habits*

Zeng Hou Yi funeral lists offer good examples of documents probably written at one time and, very possibly, by one writer, shortly after the decease of Marquis of Zeng, an event usually dated to 433 BC. These documents show a high degree of uniformity in the writing of the characters (see Fig. 1).¹³ Variations between graphs remain minor, even for the most complex characters.¹⁴ I do not suggest that such uniformity may be observed in all documents written in Chu at that time but, at least, it seems that some writers, on some occasions, would pay close attention to orthographic stability when producing a document. The question then arises whether or not this relative stability can also be observed at the collective level.

4.2 *Group habits*

The Baoshan legal documents came from the tomb of a Chu high officer who, based on the identification of a historical event mentioned on a document excavated from this tomb, probably died in 316 BC. They include archives of different cases concerning census registration, murder, loans, etc.¹⁵ Consistency in the use of some characters is quite obvious in many instances, e.g. 於.¹⁶ But the writing is not as uniform as in the Zeng Hou Yi documents. We can clearly see different hands at work and isolate graphical variants used by different people from the same community. Minor stroke differences can be observed, as in the characters 至 and 不 (see Table 1).

13 Compared with the Zeng Hou Yi sample (see table 1), variations between the different graphs used for *wei* 為 in the Guodian literary texts are clearly more significant. See, ZHANG/ZHANG/HAO, 2000:47–48.

14 See for example the character *an* 豢, ZHANG/HUANG/TENG, 1997:129–132.

15 For more details on the content of those documents see WELD, 1999:77–97, and CHEN, 1996:21–66.

16 See ZHANG, 1996:58.







至 ¹⁷			
不 ¹⁸			

Table 1: Stroke level variants in the Baoshan manuscripts.

Sometimes, variants can also be observed at a structural level (a whole graphic element can be added, omitted, or changed) and it even happens that a kind of consistency is noticeable between regular graphs and their variants, as for 安 and 中 in Baoshan documents (see Table 2).¹⁹ Here, the addition or the omission of the “roof” element constitutes the major difference between two groups of variants. In this case, the presence or absence of this element does not have any recognizable influence on the meaning or the use of the character.







安 ²⁰			
中 ²¹			

Table 2: Structural level variants in the Baoshan manuscripts.

However, the existence of such variants in the Baoshan texts should not be overestimated. They are clearly less significant than those observed in the Guodian literary texts.²²

Texts from Baoshan were written at different times, by different people, who were perhaps from different places in Chu. However, all these people belonged to a single community: they were all Chu legal officials during the second half of the fourth century BC. They had to communicate and be under-

17 See ZHANG, 1996:175.

18 See ZHANG, 1996:175.

19 For further studies on variants in ancient manuscripts, see for example RICHTER, 2005, and GALAMBOS, 2006.

20 See ZHANG, 1996:121.

21 See ZHANG, 1996:6–7; 123.

22 Compare the Baoshan documents with the Guodian manuscripts: ZHANG/ZHANG/HAO, 2000:71 (於); 163 (至; 不); 109 (安; 中).

stood without possible ambiguity. Textual ambiguity may be intended by some authors for poetic or philosophical purposes, but certainly not in the case of legal or administrative documents.

The use of some characters also deserves our attention. In transmitted literary texts, *wu* 無 and *wu* 毋 are often used without any significant difference. In Baoshan manuscripts, 無 frequently appears in juridical context. In divinatory and ritual records, 無 also appears, but quite rarely, whereas 毋 is often employed in the following formula: *shang wu you X* 尚毋有X ‘there is no X yet’. In the funeral list of the Baoshan tomb only 無 occurs. What does this difference in use mean? I cannot reach any definitive conclusion at this point. But it is clear that, for the writers of these texts, 無 and 毋 were not strictly equivalent and that, in a specific context, a Chu writer would choose one character rather than the other.

4.3 *Extended cultural/political community habits*

If we now look at all the non-literary documents produced in Chu during the Warring States period, we can see a higher degree of uniformity than if we consider all kinds of texts (including literary texts and formal inscriptions).

Characters identified by paleographers as specific to Chu belong to the writing habits of Chu people who, altogether, constitute an “extended community”. For example, the character *ping* 平 is systematically written with the ‘earth’ component (埤) in Chu documents, while two of the twenty-two sexagesimal cycle characters, *bing* 丙 and *chen* 辰, always appear with an additional element, a ‘mouth’ in the first case and a ‘sun’ in the second (see Table 3).²³ Such characters appear to be specific to Chu, but even this point is difficult to ascertain, considering that we lack manuscripts from other regions. We can at least be sure that Chu writers used to write these words in this way, but this does not necessarily mean that we will never find any one of these characters outside the Chu corpus.

23 含 (with the “mouth” element below) is also the current character for 今 in Chu documents. The single exception found by Li Shoukui in his list of Chu characters appears to be in a Guodian literary text (“Tang Yu zhi dao” 唐虞之道), cf. LI, 2003:319. Crispin Williams has observed that in Wenxian 濫縣 covenant texts the 含 form of 今 also appears, but it is rare (the current form does not contain the “mouth” element). He also noticed that this specific form does not appear at all in the Houma 侯馬 covenant tablets. See WILLIAMS, 2005:205–208.

平	丙	辰
𠄎	𠄎	𠄎

Table 3: Examples of Chu specific characters from Baoshan manuscripts.

The case of the character 酉 is also informative. An old form was used in Shang and Western Zhou inscriptions both as one of the sexagesimal characters and for the word ‘alcohol’. During the Warring States period, some writers, probably wishing to avoid confusion, started to use two different characters for these two words. In Chu, during the second half of the fourth century, the ancient form was still in use for the word ‘alcohol’ while another character was chosen for the sexagesimal character (with the ‘tree’ element).²⁴ In Qin, in third century BC documents, another practice can be observed. Most of the time, Qin followed the Western Zhou tradition and used a single character 酉 for both the sexagesimal character and the word ‘alcohol’. But we also find a few examples in Shuihudi 睡虎地 documents from a tomb dated about 217 BC, where the latter was written with yet another character, which may be seen as the direct ancestor of the modern character 酒 *jiu* (with the ‘water’ element on the left).²⁵ This is a good illustration of what may be called “writers’ habits”, a phenomenon that cannot be reduced to “graphical variants”.

24 The Geling documents do not reflect this written convention, but another also quite interesting one. In the Geling documents, the character used for the sexagesimal cycle is normally written with two supplementary little strokes on the right of the element 酉 (13 clear occurrences and only one exception on slip *jiasan* 甲三 109), whereas the character used for alcohol does not have any supplementary element. This may signify that the Chu convention which can be observed in Baoshan texts, for example, was not yet invented or that its spread was still limited at that time.

25 See ZHANG, 1994:222.









	Western Zhou	Chu		Qin	
酒					
酉					

Table 4: The characters 酉 and 酒 in Western Zhou bronze inscriptions and manuscripts from Baoshan and Shuihudi.

As already observed in the case of Baoshan, graphical variants appear to be less numerous in Chu administrative documents than in “literary texts”. This can be observed when comparing the different forms used for the character 者 in these documents and in literary texts from Guodian or the Shanghai Museum (Table 5), among others. Although some variants occur in both contexts, others seem to be only attested in literary texts. Some scholars have tried to show, quite convincingly I think, that these texts may be related to ancient manuscripts from other regions copied by a Chu writer. If this is correct, then “foreign” writing habits can also sometimes be found in Chu manuscripts.²⁶

26 These variants have attracted the attention of many palaeographers. Recently, Feng Shengjun identified eight different variants for the character 者 in the Shanghai and Guodian manuscripts. See FENG, 2007:270–272.














Baoshan 包山	Xinyang 信陽	Tianxingguan 天星觀	Geling 葛陵	Guodian 郭店	Shanghai Museum
					
					
					
					

Table 5: Some examples of variants for the character 著 in Chu manuscripts.

In some cases, it is not evident whether the different forms used for a word are simply graphical variants or different characters substituted for the same word. Such is the case, for example, with 其 and 丌 (or 丌), even if a majority of scholars regard the second as a simplification of the first. However, Lin Ching-yen has noticed that 丌 (or 丌) was the normal character for the grammatical word in Chu documents of the fourth and third centuries BC, whereas the old form 其 was still used at that time in literary texts (and formal bronze inscriptions).²⁷ As I have pointed out in an earlier paper, even though 于 and 於 can both be found in literary and technical texts (and in formal inscriptions) of the second half of the fourth century BC, only 於 was used in Chu administrative and ritual documents at the same period.²⁸

The writing habits of Chu people towards the end of the Warring States period must have been the result of a long process in the Chu area. Some documents help us realize that changes in writing habits usually take time. For example, the simplified form of *ma* 馬 () is the most commonly used form of

27 See LIN, 2005:727–729. In Qin documents, the 其 form is current, whereas 丌 is quite rare.

28 See VENTURE, 2007.

the character in Chu documents written at the end of the fourth century, whereas only the old form is used in the Zeng Hou Yi documents dating from the second half of the fifth century BC. In Geling 葛陵 documents, dating from the first half of the fourth century, the two versions are attested, but the old form was still what Imre Galambos calls the “dominant form” (two new forms / eighteen old forms). This situation may be indicative of a transitional period.²⁹





Leigudun (433 BC)	Geling (~380 BC)		Baoshan (322-316 BC)
			

Table 6: Evolution of the character 馬 in Chu culture area.

The corpus of Chu written material is increasing year by year. Chu writers' habits are visible not only in manuscripts, but also on some objects, for example the recently published divination board from Zuozhong 左冢, which contains no less than 182 characters.³⁰ This kind of discovery confirms the wide spread of the writers' habits we are trying to define through the present study of Chu documents. Such a study can help us better understand the common practice of writing in the Chu area between the fifth and third centuries BC. Understanding this common practice should in turn enable us to improve our understanding of features particular to the writing of literary texts.

5. Back to Literary Texts

As an example of a literary text, let us look at the Shanghai Museum *Zhouyi* 周易 manuscript. If we consider this as just another Warring States manuscript, we would probably have little to say about the use of characters in this text. But, if we regard it as a Chu manuscript from the end of the fourth century, a few remarks may be appropriate. A number of scholars have already discussed some

29 Here it is important to distinguish between formal and ordinary writing. Highly formal writing was used in prestigious inscriptions, like ritual bronze inscriptions. It was more conservative, and therefore less affected by the evolution of regional writing.

30 See HUBEI SHENG WENWU KAOGU YANJIUSUO, 2006:179–189.

of the graphical variants in this manuscript.³¹ I shall focus here only on some regular features in the use of different characters.

Firstly, we find old forms that are not common in other manuscripts from this period. This is the case, for example, with the character “horse” (馬). The same can be observed in the use of 于, at a time when, as mentioned before, 於 was used as a rule in Chu documents for the grammatical word. Secondly, we also have newer forms of characters in the text, for example that used for the number “four” (四). The *Zhouyi* manuscript only uses the new form 四, for which I find no examples in excavated manuscripts and inscriptions before the sixth century BC. Before that, at the time the *Zhouyi* is assumed to have been written, only the old form (𠄎) occurs, but this is absent from the Shanghai Museum *Zhouyi* manuscript. Thirdly, we find characters that not only were not current in the fourth century, but are also rare in earlier texts. This is the case with 晶 (叁), a very uncommon character used here as an equivalent of 三 (“three”). Chu writers at this period usually use the form 三 in their documents, but in this particular case, the editor of the *Zhouyi* has chosen to use only the form 晶 and never the current one.

Placing characters used in the Shanghai Museum *Zhouyi* in the context of Chu writers’ habits at the end of the fourth century suggests that the editor of this text did pay attention to the issue of consistency, at least for some characters of his text. Similar comparisons can be made with other literary or technical texts to analyze their proximity to, or distance from, the common Chu writing practice observed in Chu documents.

6. Concluding Remarks

To what extent Chu writers’ habits differ from those of writers from other states remains difficult to evaluate, mainly because of the lack of comparable corpora of documents from other states. The single known exception is Qin. But most Qin documents date from the end of the third century BC, while most of the Chu documents date from the fourth and the first half of the third century BC. At the very least, if we compare the few contemporaneous documents we have (for example the fourth century BC tablet from Haojiaping 郝家坪), it would seem that there were notable differences between Chu and Qin writers’ habits.³² These

31 See, for example, the contribution by Haeree Park in the present issue.

32 For the Haojiaping tablet see, for example, XU/WU, 1992:282–289.

differences become more evident when comparing Chu documents to Qin documents from the imperial period.

Scholars like Lothar von Falkenhausen are certainly right when insisting on the use of a single writing system in the different states during the Warring States period.³³ Everybody basically used the Shang-Zhou writing system. But several centuries of development of regional political entities governed by growing administrative bodies producing written documents on an unprecedented scale, must have entailed the development of different writing habits.

Let us finally consider today's Mainland Chinese and Taiwanese scripts. No one would claim that Taiwanese and PRC people use different writing systems: all of them basically write in "Chinese". However, after only fifty years of political separation, any reader proficient in Chinese can normally distinguish a contemporary Taiwanese newspaper article from a Mainland Chinese one. The most obvious difference is naturally the use of "simplified" or "traditional" characters, but differences also exist, for example, in vocabulary, in the use of "conservative" or "old-fashioned" expressions or due to the emergence of new words related to subjects or concepts that appeared during the past half century.³⁴ To some extent, we can say that, during this period, the Taiwanese and the Mainland Chinese have developed different writing habits.

Such differences in writing habits do not deeply bother scholars and educated people who read written material from both sides on a daily basis. However, less educated individuals who do not have frequent or easy access to materials from the other side of the Taiwan Strait will feel quite uncomfortable with such "foreign" writing. Of course, they will be able to read most of the text because a majority of characters are already familiar to them, but some characters, compound words, formulations, and/or phrases will look unfamiliar, or even remain undecipherable. They will guess the general meaning of the text and, if necessary and if possible, require the assistance of someone who is more familiar with this writing practice. I believe there must be some similarities between this situation and that of the Warring States period.

33 See FALKENHAUSEN, 2006:264.

34 In places like Hong Kong, the influence of the spoken language must also be taken into consideration.

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