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Idiomatic Acceptability and Graphic Identification in Bronze Inscriptions of the Spring and Autumn Period

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Abstract:

According to the Report on the Spring and Autumn bronze inscriptions discovered in 1983 in Henan province, the character *bao* 寶 'treasure; precious' is found written consecutively after the adverb *yong* 永 'always', giving *ze yong bao bao* 則永寶寶. The presence of this unusual juxtaposition of two *bao* 寶 is puzzling because such a phrasal structure has never been encountered in any other bronze inscriptions. The Report did not deal with this dubious structure, or justify the identification of the two characters as *bao bao* 寶寶 (hereafter referred to as X and Y), not to mention any verification of its idiomatic acceptability. After a thorough check of relevant bronze rubbings, it became clear that the Report's graphic identification of X and Y is not valid and that neither of them has anything to do with the character *bao* 寶. The new reading proposed here is based on graphic identifications and semantic analyses, buttressed with evidence from some similar idiomatic expressions found in Chinese bronze inscriptions of the same period.








1. Introduction

While doing research in 1998 on variant paleographs for the character *bao* 寶 'treasure; precious', I learnt of the existence of inscriptions on bronze vessels excavated in Henan in 1983 from the tombs of the Lord Meng of Huang (黃君孟) and his consort, Meng Ji 孟姬.¹ Archaeologists estimate that these two tombs were built shortly before the fall of the Huang state in 648 B.C.² These bronze inscriptions tersely describe dedications comprised of a recurrent phrase of good wishes: *ze yong* 則永, followed by two controversial characters [𠄎 𠄎], occasionally written with slight graphic differences. To facilitate the discussion, I hereafter label these two characters as X and Y. The authors of the 1984 excavation Report identified them as *bao bao* 寶寶

¹ The tombs were located at the Baoxiang Temple (寶相寺) in the Guangshan 光山 county in Henan 河南, about 20 km from the ancient site of the Huang state; see Henan (1984). For references of the inscriptions from these tombs, see Appendix 1.

² This date is uncertain (see Falkenhausen, 1999: 509). I would also like to thank Prof. Lothar von Falkenhausen, as well as an anonymous reviewer, for their comments on the initial version of this paper.



寶 and rendered the entire phrase as *ze yong bao bao* 則永寶寶, without specifying the meaning of the expression. However, I notice that such a duplication of *bao* 寶 has hitherto never been documented in bronze inscriptions. The singularity of this duplication, together with some other graphic peculiarities related to these two characters, casts serious doubts on the validity of the Report's identification.

According to traditional practice in bronze inscriptions, the duplication of a character is indicated by two short horizontal strokes, probably a deformed *er* 二 'two', at the right lower corner of the character to be duplicated. For example, *zi zi sun sun* 子子孫孫 'sons and grandsons' is written as , and this is exactly what is observed in Lord Meng's bronze inscriptions where all occurrences of *zi zi sun sun* 子子孫孫 are abridged by means of the diacritic sign .³ So it is strange that this duplication rule was applied to one case (子孫) but not to the case in hand (寶) within the same inscription. Graphically speaking, the Report's identification of both X and Y as *bao* 寶 or as its variants is also questionable. The five most characteristic variants of *bao* 寶 which I have so far encountered, , , , , , do not contain the graphic component *shi* 示 'altar', and only the following elements are found: *mian* 宀 'shelter', *bei* 貝 'shell', *yu* 玉 'jade', together with the three graphs representing three different kinds of wine-vessels, *fou* 缶, *fu* 鬲 and *you* 酉.⁴

These abnormalities in the Report's analysis alerted me of a possible error in its identification of X and Y, and I felt that a thorough review of the case was imperative.

2. Initial observation: the graph X is not the character *bao* 寶

In view of a strong consistency in the repeated use of the expression 則永 X Y in the bronze inscriptions in honour of the Lord of Huang and his consort, I have decided to use those better preserved forms of X and Y on the two *hu* 壺 vases belonging to the latter for my analyses to avoid any distraction of some insignificant graphic variations (for comparison see Appendix 2).

Unlike Y , X  is written without the component 'shelter' on its top. What is even more noticeable is the contrast between the components to the right of X and Y:

³ Moreover the authors of the Report had no comment on the syntactic relationship between X and Y, nor on the eventual interpretation of such a duplication. As for this diacritic sign, I shall discuss it in more detail in another article in preparation.



⁴ See *Yin Zhou jinwen jicheng* (hereafter abbreviated as *Jicheng*) vol. 7, #3994 (鬲簋, early Zhou period); 16, #10008 (樂書缶, Spring and Autumn period), #10055 (轉作寶盨盤, early Zhou period) and #10218 (周窰匜, late Zhou period); 1, #42 (楚公鬯鐘, middle Zhou period). See also Maréchal (2001: 233).

in X, the component is the graph *gu* 古 ‘ancient’, i.e., with a cross on top, whereas in Y, it is the graph *fou* 缶 ‘ceramic vase’, i.e., with an arrow-like form instead.⁵

With X identified as *hu* 祐 and clearly distinguished from Y, a duplication of *bao* 寶 in the expression is out of question.⁶ Consequently, it should be read as 則永祐 Y, with the graph Y yet to be deciphered.

Following the chronological development of my study, I now introduce the two articles by Li Xueqin (1985) and Liu Xiang (1988) respectively.⁷ I mention them at this juncture because it was only at this stage of my study on X and Y that I learnt of the existence of their papers which have direct bearing on the topic. However, my unawareness of their work did not handicap the first stage of my study, but rather provided me with an occasion to develop my own line of thought.

3. Two other paleographers’ identification of X and Y in the bronze inscriptions dealing with Meng and his consort

Li (1985) already expressed exactly the same doubts about the Report’s identification of X and Y; he did not consider them as two identical graphs in all the bronze inscriptions of the Meng couple. Moreover, he too, read X on Meng’s consort *hu* 壺 vases as *hu* 祐. However, our commonality in interpretation stops there. For me, the expressions 則永 X Y in the husband’s inscriptions and those in the consort’s are identical, for Li, on the contrary, they are different. Li (1985: 49) identified X Y in the husband’s inscriptions as *bao yong* 寶用. It has to be noted that there are only three inscriptions belonging to Lord Meng of Huang where X and Y are legible. As far as X is concerned, in two of these three cases, the upper part of the component on the left under the element ‘shelter’ (*Jicheng* 16, #9963, #10104) is in the form of an arrow with a little horizontal stroke [], giving *fou* 缶 []. Apparently Li used the presence of this *fou* 缶 as a phonological argument for justifying his reading of X as *bao* 寶 and yet his analysis cannot be applied to the third case (*Jicheng* 4, #2497)

⁵ See *Jicheng* 15, #9663, #9664. It is a pity that many of these inscriptions are not quite legible. However, under careful scrutiny, some of them do present such traces of distinction between X and Y (see *Jicheng* 4, #2497; 15, #9445; 16, #10 254).

⁶ Before I engaged in this study, I had already expressed my doubt in a paper (Maréchal, 1998) in which I proposed to identify X as *hu* 祐 rather than *bao* 寶. The meaning of *hu* 祐 will be discussed later in this paper.

⁷ It was on reading Luo (1997: 27) that I learnt of the existence of these two articles. But it was not an easy task to locate them because Luo did not provide either date or place of their publication. See also note 9 further down.

where this component *fou* 缶 is replaced by *gu* 古. As for Y, Li considered that there is a graphic component in the form of two *chong* 虫 ‘worm’, with one on top of the other, [𧈧]. He then argued that this form of Y shared some strong phonological resemblance with *rong* 融, and since *rong* 融 and *yong* 用 ‘to use’, too, belonged to related rhyming categories, he eventually interpreted Y as *yong* 用 ‘to use’. Unfortunately I fail to identify in the inscriptions the graph with the two ‘worms’ superimposed, and thus I feel there is a missing link in his analysis.⁸

As for the X and Y in the consort’s inscriptions, Li (1985: 49) identified them respectively as *hu* 祐 and *bao* 寶, resulting in the reading of *ze yong hu bao* 則永祐寶. Being conscious of the oddity of the presence of *hu* 祐 in the resulting expression, Li felt obliged to justify his identification of that character. He first stated that *hu* 祐 should be re-read as *ju* 居 ‘to inhabit, to lodge’ and then rendered the meaning of this second reading *ju* 居 as *cang* 藏 ‘to hide’. The aim of these two successive shifts in the reading of X was to allow him to assert that the meaning of the expression is close, or even equivalent, to that of an idiomatic expression *yong bao yong* 永寶用 ‘forever treasure and use (this object in bronze)’ (“‘祐’讀為‘居’，訓為藏，句意仍與‘永寶用’相同”). Unfortunately he did not elaborate this chain of interpretations on phonosemantic grounds. As far as this paper is concerned, it is clear that the initial reading of X is *hu* 祐, but other interpretative differences between us surface in the final phase of the identification of X and Y in the entire expression.

Meanwhile Liu Xiang (1988) was also working on the same subject.⁹ Liu

⁸ Here I only summarize Li’s idea as expounded in his article. His original statement is as follows:

“兩字結構不同，前一字從‘缶’聲，自當讀為‘寶’；後一字則從兩‘虫’，系‘蟲’省聲。按《說文》‘融’字從‘蟲’省聲，金文及楚帛書都從兩‘虫’。從諧聲觀點看，銘文此字音近於‘融’。‘融’和‘用’聲母同，韻在冬、東二部，又極相近。因此，銘文這個字讀為‘用’，‘永寶用’是眾所周知的金文習語。”

⁹ In spite of the fact that his article was published three years after Li’s paper, Liu might have been working on the inscriptions at the same time as Li, if not earlier, because Li (1985: 52) acknowledged Liu for providing him with general information about the excavation site. It might be the case that it was out of respect for his master that Liu deliberately avoided mentioning Li’s article so as not to make their disagreement explicit.

I would like to thank Prof. Yau Shun-chiu for his precious comments on the early draft of this paper, his help in rendering it into English and locating Li’s article. I am also very grateful to Prof. Ken-ichi Takashima for his overall remarks and suggestions which enable me to produce this final version.

As for Liu’s article, it was Prof. Dong Kun of the Chinese Linguistic Research Centre in Beijing who, in March 2001, provided me a copy together with a note, telling me the sad news of the author’s death in 1999.

considered that the expression 則永 X Y is identical in inscriptions respectively in honour of the couple, a viewpoint which I share with him, but with which Li disagreed.¹⁰ Liu first arrived at the conclusion that X and Y in all the inscriptions should be identified as *hu bao* 祜寶, an identification which both Liu and Li agreed on as far as the inscriptions in honour of the husband are concerned. Liu (1988: 93) was also conscious of the fact that such an expression had not been documented elsewhere, and for justification, he suggested that it be read as *yong hu bao* 永祜寶, its meaning would find echo in an existent set phrase: *yong hu fu* 永祜福 (“一辭互相印証, 意思是接近的”). Although Liu’s identification does not sound more convincing than Li’s, his semantic interpretation of the expression seems more reasonable.¹¹ The remaining issue now is the identification of Y which Li, Liu and the authors of the Report all agreed to be *bao* 寶.

4. Arguments for my identifications of X and Y as 祜 and 福

As in the case of X, Y is written either with or without the component ‘shelter’ [𡩺], [𡩻], and only the presence of the components *fou* 缶 and *shi* 示 is consistent. In general, *shi* 示 as a semantic component suggests a ritual or supernatural colour or has a connotation of certain traditional beliefs, as still witnessed in such present-day characters as *li* 禮 ‘rite’, *zhu* 祝 ‘to pray’, *ji* 祭 ‘sacrifice’, *shen* 神 ‘spirit’ or *sui* 祟 ‘evil spirit’. If Y is a variant of *bao* 寶 as proposed in the Report, it would imply that the component *shi* 示 is a new graphic addition. However from Shang through Zhou down to the Spring and Autumn period, *shi* 示 rarely functions as a distinctive feature

¹⁰ Liu (1988: 93) was heedful to the slight graphic variations among the X in the inscriptions in honour of the husband and arrived at the conclusion that there was a graphic error in X, that is, with *fou* 缶 as phonetic indicator instead of *gu* 古, the correct one, as written in two of the X items (“‘永寶寶’的第一個‘寶’字寫成從示缶聲, 實為祜字從示古聲的筆誤”). On re-reading his article, I am convinced that he was close to obtaining a full and correct explanation.

¹¹ However, their interpretations of these two characters have been adopted in several recent publications, for example Zeng (1997) and Liu (2001). I have also noticed that the two bronzes from the Huang couple’s tombs exhibited in Hong Kong (2002) carried the following captions:

黃子作黃甫(夫)人行器, 則永祜寶霽冬(終)霽復 “Huang Zi made this vessel for Huangfuren to take on her journey. This will remain a precious and spiritual item for eternity” [sic] and 黃子作黃甫(夫)人孟姬行器, 則永寶寶 “Huang Zi made this vessel for Huangfuren, Meng Ji, to take on her journey, and this will remain a precious item for eternity” [sic].

The former is an interpretation close to that of Li and Liu, and the latter is an adaptation of the Report’s identification (see Catalogue of the exhibition *Origins of Chinese Civilization—Cultural Relics from Henan Province*, 2002: 224, 226).

in variant forms of characters that have a supernatural significance. So far I have only encountered two graphs where the component *shi* 示 was added in bronze inscriptions: *hu* 𠄎 ‘to appeal to spirits’ [𠄎] (𠄎令方彝, early Zhou period, *Jicheng* 16, #9901) and *ling* 𠄎 ‘spirit’ [𠄎] (庚壺, Late Spring and Autumn period, *Jicheng* 15, #9733).¹² As Y is composed of *shi* 示, its identification as *bao* 寶 is therefore very doubtful as it does not share the kind of supernatural connotation necessary to acquire this particular element.

As a counter proposal, I suggest that Y is a variant form of *fu* 福 ‘blessings’. The presence of the component *shi* 示 marks a significant step in the identification process of Y. Originally, *fu* 福 was a ritual term¹³, and its lexical background sheds light on the rationale of *shi* 示 as its semantic basis, and provides an interesting hint in identifying Y as *fu* 福. From then on, the two apparently unusual components in Y, *mian* 𠄎 ‘shelter’ and *fou* 缶 have yet to be clarified. The component ‘shelter’ does not constitute an obstacle in my identification of Y because a few variants of *fu* 福 with ‘shelter’ [𠄎] have already been located in bronze inscriptions of the middle Zhou period (see 秬卣, *Jicheng* 10, #5411). The last problem to address is the component *fou* 缶 in Y, as compared with *fu* 鬲, its usual corresponding element in *fu* 福. In fact, in terms of referent-object, *fou* 缶, as a component in Y (*fu* 福), belongs to the same kind of recipients as those of *fu* 鬲 or *you* 酉, as they are all pictographs representing wine-vessels for ritual ceremonies. In addition, the latter two, *fu* 鬲 and *you* 酉, are already found as alternative elements in the composition of *fu* 福 in bronze inscriptions of the late Spring and Autumn period: [𠄎] and [𠄎] (see 曾子尾簠, *Jicheng* 9,

¹² By the time of the Warring States, *shi* 示 then often functions as a distinctive feature in variant forms of characters that have a supernatural significance. For example, the character [𠄎], composed of *shi* 示 and *gui* 鬼, is considered in the *Shuowen jiezi* as the ‘ancient script form’ (*guwen* 古文) of *gui* 鬼, and Sun (1992: 382) identified two cases of this compound form in oracle-bone inscriptions. However Ye (1966: 4. 25) contended that the graphs identified by Sun might not be used in the sense of *gui* 鬼 but rather in the sense of *zhu* 祝 ‘to pray’, and Xu (1993: 30) listed it as an item with “unknown meaning” (*yi bu ming* 義不明). This variant form [𠄎] surfaces again in bronze inscriptions during the Warring States period (see 𠄎盞蓋, *Jicheng* 8, #4190) and Zhang (2001) approved its reading as *gui* 鬼.

¹³ Paleographers are not unanimous in the identification of *fu* 福 in JGW (see Yu, 1996: t. 2, pp. 1072-1078). My reading of *fu* 福 here is based on a later source as found in *Zhou li* 周禮 and its many annotations (quoted in Yu, 1996: t. 2, p. 1072) which indicates that the ritual aspect of *fu* 福 is related to meat offering.

#4528. 1-2).¹⁴ It seems likely that this referent-object *fou* 缶 was used both for its symbolic value as an alternative to the other two components *fu* 富 and *you* 酉 in the course of the graphic evolution of *fu* 福. The *fou* 缶 in Y therefore can be regarded as a replacement for the other two corresponding components in the more usual forms of *fu* 福 [福], [酉].¹⁵ It has to be noted that *fu* 富, *you* 酉 and *fou* 缶 as alternative components in *fu* 福 is not an isolated case because the same alternatives are observed among the variants of *bao* 寶 as quoted at the beginning of this paper.

So far my identification of X and Y are strictly based on graphic grounds, without resorting to any prior knowledge of a possible correspondence. Such a procedure avoids the risk of prejudicially forcing unjustified readings of characters into an existent expression. By now, my findings are ready to be subject to checking against *tao yu* 套語 ‘traditional formulae’, a verifying step considered as determinant by Chinese scholars in paleographic identifications.¹⁶

In the final analysis, my identification of X and Y renders the expression as *ze yong*

¹⁴ Others variants of *fu* 福 composed with *you* 酉 are also attested on other bronzes, see 伯泂其盨 and 伯公父簠: *Jicheng* 9, #4446 and #4628. Some of these variants are occasionally written with ‘shelter’ on top, see 曾師季斝盤: *Jicheng* 16, #10138.

In documents written on bamboo in later period, in particular those belonging to the Chu state, the graph *fu* 福 is always written with the component *you* 酉 [酉] (see Teng, 1995: 20).

¹⁵ The phonetic indicator in *fu* 福 can be either *fu* 富 (職部) or *you* 酉 and *fou* 缶 (幽部). From a phonological viewpoint, these graphic alternatives reflect that the two rhyming categories *zhi* 職 and *you* 幽 were indirectly related, according to the rule *pang dui zhuan* 旁對轉 proposed by Wang (1982: 14); see also Shi (1984).

On the other hand, Yang Shuda (1997: 11) considered that “a graph can be used as an alternative if its pronunciation is close to that of the usual phonetic indicator.” (音近聲旁任作). In my case, however, the alternatives *you* 酉, *fou* 缶 and *fu* 富 in 福 are basically justified in terms of their forms and functions as receptacles, whereas their phonological aspects only serve as supporting arguments. This graphic approach has proved to be efficient for analysing certain characters in their ancient forms where phonological hints are less evident (see Yau, 2001).

¹⁶ At a recent conference in Paris, Prof. Hu Pingsheng provided us with a similar case happened to a Han mural document written in *lishu* style 隸書 discovered in the 90s in the province of Gansu. Three characters in the text damaged during the excavation were first rewritten as *shun jian xia* 順見夏, despite the fact that the components on the left side of the first character and the lower part of the third one are illegible and that the resultant phrase remains incomprehensible. Thanks to the presence of a recurrent expression found within the same text and also elsewhere, the phrase was reconstructed successfully as 顯見處 ‘(important decrees) be shown in prominent places’. See also Zhongguo wenwu yanjiusuo, et al. (2001: 37).

hu fu 則永祜福 ‘let blessings be everlasting and great.’¹⁷ This is supported by several instances of the phrase 永祜福 from other bronze inscriptions around Meng’s time listed in the *Qingtongqi mingwen jiansuo* (Zhou, et al., 1995: 1.24; see also Appendix 3). Apparently the expression is peculiar to that period in regions near the border between Henan and Hubei¹⁸, and its limited appearance with only seven examples documented in bronze inscriptions is much less frequent than that of *yong bao yong* 永寶用, for example.¹⁹ Interestingly, five out of these seven examples are found on bronzes from the Zeng state 曾國, a nearby polity of Huang. In view of their good neighbourliness, it is revealing for the present study to compare the bronze inscriptions from Zeng and Huang.²⁰ Bronze inscriptions from that region indicate that the two states were on good terms, and their ties were strengthened by intermarriage, and some bronzes were offered reciprocally as dowries (see Li, 1984: 142). Confirmation of the usage of this expression in Zeng’s bronze inscriptions lends extra weight to my identification.²¹

As early as 1947, Yang Shuda discussed the phrase *ze yong hu fu* 則永祜福 in a

¹⁷ *Ze yong hu fu* 則永祜福 can be considered as a set phrase expressing a wish, comparable to ‘God bless you’ in English. For a detailed analysis of this set phrase, see further down in this paper.

¹⁸ A similar kind of peculiarity around this has been noted by Mattos (1997: 120) in the states of Chu and Qin. His explanation is that “It was the house of Zhou, after all, that set a precedent for formulaic writing of this sort; and it seems likely that as the feudal states drifted away from the influence of their Zhou teachers, they nonetheless followed suit by creating their own schools of composition which also prized formulaic writing, especially in the case of inscribed texts.”

¹⁹ The references of the seven inscriptions of the Spring and Autumn period mentioned here are: 曾子伯諱鼎, *Jicheng* 4, #2450; 伯疆簠 *Jicheng* 9, #4526; 曾子隰簠 *Jicheng* 9, #4528.1 and 2, #4529.1 and 2; 叔埤父簠蓋 *Jicheng* 9, #4544. In three of these seven inscriptions, the phrase *yong hu fu* 永祜福 is not preceded by *ze* 則 (for the gloss of this character, see the last paragraph of this section).

²⁰ The Huang state is located to the west of the Huan district in today’s Henan province, whereas the Zeng state is somewhere between Henan and Hubei, see Li (1984: 135).

²¹ Zhang Yachu in his *Index of Jicheng* published in July 2001 also read 則永XY as 則永祜福 in most of the cases quoted. Naturally he could not provide us with explanations for his readings in a reference book of this kind. I should thank Prof. Zhao Cheng for informing me recently about this monumental publication.

notice regarding a Zeng bronze inscription.²² He argued on phonological grounds that *ze* 則 should be read as *zai* 載. For him it is clear that *ze* 則 is not a functional item, otherwise he could have rendered it as *jiu* 就 ‘then’—a gloss normally provided for *ze* 則 in dictionaries (see Cui, 1994: 35). As for *hu* 祜, his interpretation is ambiguous. He first claimed that the character could be read as *fu* 福 and more precisely in the sense of *da fu* 大福 ‘great blessings’ according to Jia Yi 賈誼 (201-169 B.C.), author of the *Xinshu* 新書. However, he immediately added that according to some other sources, *hu* 祜 could be semantically and phonetically identified with a later graphic form *hu* 胡 as in *yong shou hu fu* 永受胡福 ‘forever receive great blessings.’ But functionally speaking, this *hu* written either in the form 祜 or 胡, is an adjective, meaning ‘great’, and is therefore not synonymous with the nominal *fu* 福 ‘blessings’. This is based on the fact that *fu* 福 in bronze inscriptions is often preceded by adjectives of similar meaning, for example *da fu* 大福, *neng fu* 能福, *duo fu* 多福, *hou fu* 厚福, *wan fu* 萬福, *pin fu* 瀕福 or *feng fu* 豐福, all expressing a common idea of ‘many blessings’ or ‘great blessings’. Consequently, I translate the inscription as: ‘let blessings be everlasting and great.’

Epilogue

I would like to add a final remark on the component *fou* 缶 in Y, a question already raised in this paper.²³ Out of the fourteen legible *ze yong* X Y from the bronze inscriptions in honour of the Meng couple, twelve of their X and Y are either both written with their most visible or salient component ‘shelter’ on top (in ten inscriptions) or both without (in two of them).²⁴ With such a high percentage (about 86%) of the cases being this way, it is difficult to explain away the partial similarities between their graphic forms as a mere coincidence, and I suspect that they were deliberately used for calligraphic or aesthetic reasons. In the same way, the choice of

²² Here is Yang’s original text:

“余按古音則與載同，則永祜福即載永祜福。祜通訓為福，祜福同義連文，義自可通。然賈子新書禮篇云：‘祜，大福也’然則永祜福蓋謂大福也。儀禮士冠禮加冠祝辭云：‘眉壽萬年，永受胡福’胡福亦謂大福也。周書謚法解及廣雅釋詁一並云：‘胡，大也。’祜與胡同從古聲，並有大義，銘文之‘則永祜福，’即儀禮之‘永受胡福’也。鄭注士冠禮云‘胡猶遐也，遠也，遠無窮。’遠與大義亦相近，惟經既云永受，不必復言無窮之福，胡仍以訓大為較切矣。” (Yang, 1997: 130).

²³ Though X and Y are now identified as *hu fu* 祜福, for the convenience of the discussion, I continue to refer to them as X and Y.

²⁴ In the two remaining cases, contrary to Y, X is written without the roof-top.

fou 缶 in Y was also related to the presence of *gu* 古 in the immediately preceding graph *hu* 祐 and the two components might have provided the scribes with an opportunity for an exercise in aesthetics or calligraphic innovation.²⁵ It is well-known that while the Zhou dynasty was waning, various states felt free to develop their own cultural creativities with strong local features, including their styles of writing. It is therefore not surprising to find scribes would occasionally take the liberty to modify the composition of certain characters to satisfy their artistic desire. The fact that the First Emperor of Qin started standardizing the writing system soon after unification clearly demonstrated the impact of important diversification in graphic forms. It is in this perspective that I venture to propose that the two consecutive characters X and Y, i.e., *hu fu* 祐福 in the inscriptions, constitute one of the earliest examples of graphic modifications involving two successive characters with an aesthetic intention and appeal. Moreover, the scribes' creativeness might be further encouraged by a recent tendency of having the inscriptions more directly exposed to the viewers, that is, instead of deep in the bottom or on the curved surface inside a vessel, they are made on the external surface of the bronzes, a feature that became more and more prominent during the Spring and Autumn period.²⁶ To drive home this point, I would like to draw the readers' attention to two other variants of *fu* 福 on two bronzes with unknown

²⁵ The idea here is supported by remarks scattered in related literature, for example in Gu, et al. (2001: 408), we read:

“During the Spring and Autumn period, the art of Chinese calligraphy began to develop. At that time, writing was no long purely a means of communication, but already consciously regarded as an art, with its decorative function on relief.” (“春秋時代是中國書法藝術開始發展的時期，這一時期文字已不局限于書寫的功能，有意識地把文字作為藝術品，突出其裝飾性”).

²⁶ Mattos (1997: 121) writes:

“...during the late Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods we find inscriptions increasingly being placed on the exterior surfaces of bronze vessels. During the Western Zhou period, inscriptions normally had been placed rather inconspicuously on the interior surfaces of vessels, suggesting that they were not intended for others' casual perusal. It would appear, however, that as time passed inscriptions were meant more for human than spiritual consumption.”

My hypothesis therefore offers a specific case in support of his general observation.

provenance, having been excavated before the advent of modern archaeology.²⁷

The first variant of this *fu* 福 [福] is inscribed at the bottom left of a *gui* 簋, dated back to the end of Western Zhou (see Appendix 4) (*Jicheng* 7, #3925; see also Chen, 1989: 87). Under the component ‘shelter’, the two elements *shi* 示 and *bei* 貝 are written on the left, and *yu* 玉 on the right, plus a hardly legible element underneath. However, the resemblance between this variant of *fu* 福 and the character *bao* 寶 at the bottom right in the same inscription is striking. The presence of the two unexpected components ‘shell’ and ‘jade’ in this *fu* 福 variant curiously reminds us of the graphic composition of *bao* 寶 to its right.

The same kind of graphic resemblance is observed in an inscription where another variant form of *fu* 福 [福] is inscribed side by side with *zun* 尊 [尊] on a *ding* 鼎 dated to the middle of Western Zhou (*Jicheng* 4, #2280; Chou, 1974: 1.76) (see Appendix 5). This variant is composed of the element ‘shelter’ on top with *yu* 玉, *you* 酉 and *shi* 示 below. Its component *you* 酉 seems to echo the character *zun* 尊 containing the same *you* 酉, inscribed just by its side. I have the feeling that the choice of a common component might not be a coincidence, but perhaps a graphic play, or at least out of some sort of calligraphic consideration.²⁸

In the light of these two preceding variants of *fu* 福 [福], [福], it is not impossible that a similar phenomenon is being reproduced in the variant form of Y in the inscription from the tombs of the Lord Meng of Huang and his consort. The choice of

²⁷ I would like to thank Prof. Li Xueqin for his prompt reply soon after reading the preliminary version of this paper presented at the Vancouver Conference. In his letter, he draws my attention to the absence in *Jinwen zhulu jianmu* (Sun, 1981) of the first inscription which I quoted from *Jicheng* 7, #3925. His remark seems to imply that it is insufficient to remind the reader that the inscription is of “unknown provenance.” In this inscription, he finds the forms of the characters *yong* 用 [用], *ming* 命 [命] and *shou* 受 [受], strange. Though I agree with him that the forms of these three characters are peculiar, I am rather reluctant to affirm that these forms are not traceable in other inscriptions. For example, I can at least confirm that this same form of *yong* 用 is attested in others bronze inscriptions (see Rong, 1994). In sum, Prof. Li’s remark boils down to a highly learned dispute between the compilers of the two authoritative works of reference. I therefore decide to leave the question of this inscription’s authenticity to other scholars and maintain for the time being the inclusion of this inscription in my paper. Moreover, I do not think that my arguments will be weakened even if this inscription eventually turns out to be fake.

²⁸ Both Prof. Yau Shun-chiu and Prof. Lothar von Falkenhausen advise me to conduct a follow-up study on this graphic aesthetic dimension of Chinese writing. Yau has the impression that this kind of calligraphic innovation, if confirmed, resembles the use of internal rhymes in poetry. Some similar cases in other bronze inscriptions reinforce my conviction that these graphic peculiarities should not be dismissed without further investigation.

fou 缶 in the following two variant forms of *fu* 福 [福], [𠄎] can be explained by its graphic resemblance to the component *gu* 古 ‘ancient’ in the preceding character *hu* 祐 [祐], [𠄎] in the inscriptions. It is for this reason that I think there is a certain relationship between the choice of a less familiar, if not completely new component, to replace the usual one and the intention to create graphic similarities. However, such calligraphic or aesthetic considerations are effected at the expense of graphic consistency. The resulting variants might create difficulties or even confusion in their identification as experienced by the authors of the Report.

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Appendix 1:

The following reference numbers for the bronze inscriptions in honour of Huang Jun Meng 黃君孟 are from the *Jicheng* 集成. According to the Report, there are 11 inscriptions belonging to him, but only 8 of them are found in the *Jicheng*:

Jicheng 4, #2497 (黃君孟鼎)

Jicheng 9, #4686 (黃君孟豆; editors' remark: two identical inscriptions on two *dou* were found in the same tomb. Only one of them is registered here “備注：同墓出同銘豆兩件，現僅銘其一”)

Jicheng 15, #9636 (黃君孟壺)

Jicheng 16, #9963 (黃君孟罏); #10104 (黃君孟盤); #10230 (黃君孟匜)

Jicheng 17, #11199 (黃君孟戈)

The following reference numbers for the bronze inscriptions in honour of the consort of Huang Jun Meng (Meng Ji 孟姬) are from the *Jicheng*. According to the Report, there are 14 inscriptions belonging to her. However the *Jicheng* notes that there are two more whose inscriptions have not yet been catalogued (著錄：未見).

Jicheng 3, #624 (黃子鬲); #687 (黃子鬲)

Jicheng 5, #2566 (黃子鼎); #2567 (黃子鼎)

Jicheng 9, #4687 (黃子豆; editors' remark: two identical inscriptions on two *dou* were found in the same tomb. Only one of them is registered here “備注：同墓出同銘豆兩件，現僅銘其一”)

Jicheng 15, #9445 (黃子盃); #9663 (黃子壺); #9664 (黃子壺) [未見]

Jicheng 16, #9966 (黃子罏); #9987 (黃子罐); #10122 (黃子盤); #10254 (黃子匜) [未見]; #10355 (黃子器座)

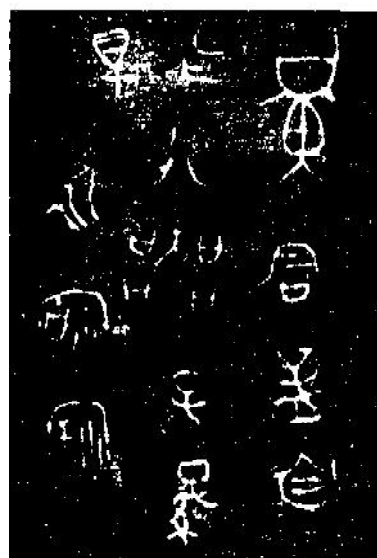
Appendix 2:



Jicheng 15, #9663 (黃子壺)



Jicheng 15, #9664 (黃子壺)



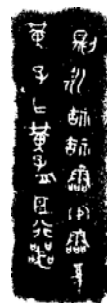
Jicheng 16, #10230 (黃君孟匜)



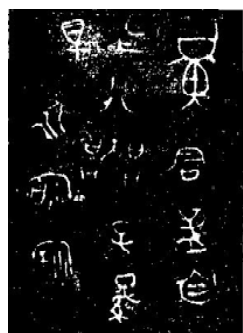
Jicheng 16, #10254 (黃子匜)



Jicheng 15, #9445 (黄子盃)



Jicheng 16, #10122 (黄子盤)



Jicheng 16, #10104 (黄君孟盤)



Jicheng 4, #2497 (黄君孟鼎)



Jicheng 16, #9963 (黄君孟壺)

Appendix 3:



Jicheng 9, #4528 (曾子戣簋)

Appendix 4:



Jicheng 7, #3925 (命父謹簋)

Appendix 5:



Jicheng 4, #2280 (鬲鼎)