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# The Problem of Unattested Characters in the Shuo wen jie zi

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### The problem of unattested characters in the *Shuowen jiezi*

If we retain the basic definition of a dictionary as a reference book that lists meaningful units in order, and gives their meanings, the *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 (100) counts as a proper dictionary. The author, Xu Shen, has provided an original method to organize the entries, and has systematically given a gloss for each of them.

The *Shuowen jiezi* was compiled to help the understanding of the Classics. Xu Shen obviously explained many words one can find in the Classics. But it turns out that, in fact, he has also included many terms unattested elsewhere in the literature. I shall use examples from the horse and other radicals to show how a dictionary can be extensively collecting terms that as far as we can see in our comprehensive databases were never used in practice. Since the *Shuowen jiezi* initiated a long tradition of dictionary making in China, many important later well-known dictionaries continued to collect these unattested terms, with or without quoting “*Shuowen*” as its source, and thus giving the impression that they were well attested. This is the case, for example, of *yang* 諛 which Xu Shen glossed: 早知也 “*yang* is to know beforehand” (*Shuowen* ch. 3A 5b DXB, p. 51). We can see that the *Yupian* (1013) (1983: 165), *Leipian* 類篇 (ch. 3 A 17b, 1988: 84), *Kangxi zidian* 康熙字典 (言部 22), etc., have reproduced the same gloss, and failed to provide any other source.

In this presentation, we shall see that these unattested characters should be divided into two types: already existing characters but referring to other words (like for example: *huān* 驩 and *zhān* 驪), and non-existing (or invented) characters (like, for example, *bā* 𠮩). I shall then try to analyse them in terms of graphologically motivated graphs (*nuán* 媮, *huān* 驩), prescriptive graphs (*xián* 驪, *zhān* 驪), and pure inventions (*bā* 𠮩), in an attempt to clarify Xu Shen’s methodology, failures and creativity.

Bottéro, F, and Harbsmeier, C., 2016, *Chinese lexicography on Matters of the Heart. An Exploratory Commentary on the Heart Radical in Shuō wén jiě zì* 說文解字. Collection des Cahiers de Linguistique Asie Orientale, Vol. 14. Paris : EHESS-CRLAO.

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*Kangxi zidian* 康熙字典, 1958, Beijing: Zhonghua shuju.

*Leipian* 類篇, 1988, Shanghai, Guji chunbanshe.

*Song Ben Yupian*, 1983, Beijing Shi Zhongguo shudian.

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