The structure, distribution and naming properties of Early Chinese 'clan signs': an attempt at an overview

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Unlike China's earliest (partly) readable texts, the late Shāng (13th-11th c. BCE) so-called oracle bone inscriptions preserved mostly on bovide shoulder blades and water turtle plastrons (*jiǎgǔwén* 甲骨文), which were largely forgotten until their rediscoverey at the turn to the last century, bronze inscriptions (*jīnwén* 金文), attested from the 12th century BCE onwards, seem to have been always known and occasionally mentioned throughout the classical period. They were first systematically catalogued during the Northern Sòng period (960-1127), and it was already during this initial phase of scholarship on bronze inscriptions, that several authors noticed that some of the more archaic inscriptions include graphs with a strongly depictive or "pictographic" character, often clearly distinct in position, size and ductus from the more linear and abstract graph forms encountered in the texts which they accompany. The famous Chinese paleographer Guō Mòruò 郭沫若 (1892-1978) first called these graphs "clan symbols" (*zú huī* 族徽) in a study published in 1930, where he argued that they represent quasi-totemic markers of ancient Shāng polities and stressed their status as proto-writing.

While Guō's theory continues to receive wide support in Western and Chinese studies of the subject, other designations and theories about their original function abound. There is no lack of controversies about whether they should be classified and analyzed as writing *senu strictu* or as "emblems", functioning like heraldic signs or "coats of arms" in various Europan traditions, what their role in our narratives on the origins of Chinese writing could be, and whether they represent names of individuals, kin-, lineage- or exogamy-based groups, or even other social and political entities.

Proceeding from the most recent catalogue and study of these signs (Hé Jǐngchéng 2009), I will first introduce the extant corpus some 900 simplex graphs, summarize the Chinese and Japanese scholarship on their distribution, decipherment and relationship towards other early forms Chinese of writing, and then focus on their combinatory properties, as evidenced in a corpus of some 530 compound graphs known so far. In a second step, the clan names most likely represented by these signs, will be compared to those clan and personal names occuring in "regular" oracle bone and bronze inscriptions (on which see, e.g., Dīng Shān 1956, Wú Zhènfēng 2006). If time permits, the techniques of "name" marking by classifiers and diacritics in early Chinese writing will be compared to those encountered in other early non-alphabetic writing systems.

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