

# On the Etymology of *he* ‘river’ in Chinese

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**Abstract**—In Chinese *he* 河 ‘river’ can be used as proper names (for the Yellow River), as well as a common word for rivers in North China. Based on linguistic data, ethnological evidence and historical documents, this paper argues against these leading hypotheses and proposes that *he* originated from the Old Yi language, entered Chinese through language contact, and replaced *shui* which was from Old Qiang and later became the only common noun for river in North China.

**Key words**—etymology; *he* ‘river’; *shui* 水 ‘river’; Old Yi; Chinese

## I. INTRODUCTION

When it comes to the etymology of Chinese *he* 河, abundant literature can be found. Of them, there are three major approaches for etymological inquiry into *he*.

The First approach [1] is based on sound laws. Since *he*’s reconstructed form is \*g’al [2-3] or \*g’ar [4-5], it is believed to be from Altaic (cf. *yool* in Mongolian). Unfortunately, this approach lacks evidence: there is no archaeological evidence that the Yellow River basin was at one time inhabited by Altaic speakers who left the name behind [6].

The second approach [7] is based on semantic laws. It is argued that the phonetic element of *he*, i.e., *ke* 可, has the etymonic meaning of “big”, specifically referring to the Yellow River. However, of these five example words provided, only four applicable — 柯 does not support what he wants to establish [6]. Besides, few of the following examples found in other archaic documents have the meaning “big”, e.g., 衲 ‘sleeve’, 箭 ‘shaft of arrow’, 鰲 ‘globefish’, 珂 ‘a kind of jade’, etc. Some of them even have the meaning of “small”, such as 钶 ‘small wok’.

The third one [6] [8] is based on the belief that the Yellow River got its name *he* because of its shape. Tōdō [6] believes that it was bent like a hook, while Takashima [8] argues the part of the Yellow River with which the people living by it were familiar was like an adze handle. This approach, however, is also doubtful. The Yellow River is so big. Even though people could see the river every day, they did not know the shape of it since no one would walk along the river for thousands of miles to find out its shape (Even he did so, he was not able to draw a map and conclude that the river was bent like a hook or an adze handle).

Last but not less important, there is still one problem confronting the second and third approaches, that is, the representative scholars, while providing evidence to show the origin of *he*, did not tell us how *he* replaced *shui* and

later became the only common noun for river in North China. We will start with the argument that *he* came from a certain local aboriginal language, namely, Old Yi.

## II. HE AS A COMMON NOUN IN OLD CHINESE

Many scholars believe that *he* was used as a proper name for the Yellow River first, and later developed into a common noun. For example, Wang [9] proposes explicitly that all *he*’s in ancient documents should be understood as the Yellow river or its tributaries. We do not agree with this and we would like to argue that *he* in Old Chinese could be used as a common noun, too. Evidence is shown below:

First, in *Shangshu* 《尚书·禹贡》(*Documents of the Elder*), the expression *jiu he* 九河 “nine rivers” can be found. The names of these nine rivers are presented in “*shi shui*” of *Erya* 《尔雅·释水》. They are *Tuhai* 徒骇, *Taishi* 太史, *Majia* 马颊, *Fufu* 覆釜, *Husu* 胡苏, *Jian* 简, *Jie* 洁, *Goupan* 钩盘, *Gejin* 鬲津. Six of them can still be found today, scattering on the North China plain.

Second, *he* is used in *Shijing* (*The Book of Odes*) as a common noun, as shown below:

委委佗佗，如山如河。（《鄘风·君子偕老》）

... *ru shan ru he*  
... like mountain like river

‘... Stately as a mountain, majestic as a river.’

Here, *he* appears in juxtaposition with *shan* ‘mountain’, thus forming a parallelism. This indicates that *he* here, just like *shan*, is not a proper name referring to the Yellow River, but a common word.

Last, in *Zhuangzi* 《庄子·外物》, the Qiantang River was called *Zhi he* 制河. If the above two clues are not definitive enough, this one surely is. The Qiantang River, being thousands of miles away from the Yellow River, obviously, has nothing to do with it. However, Zhuangzi (Master Zhuang) could address it as *he*. This obviously shows that at least in the Warring States period (475BC-221BC), *he* was not only a proper name for the Yellow River, but also a common noun (at least regionally).

When examining *Shijing*, it is more interesting to notice that only in *Qin feng* (Qin Ballads) can we find that *shui* is used separately as a common noun for river, as shown below:

所谓伊人，在水一方。（《秦风·蒹葭》）

... *zai shui yi fang*  
... stay river one region  
‘... is somewhere about the river.’

溯游从之，宛在水中央。《秦风·蒹葭》

... wan zai shui zhongyang

... as-if in river middle

‘... (She) is right in the midst of the river.’

While in the state of Yong, it is not *shui* but *he* that is used separately as a common noun for river, as shown above. This, clearly, indicates that in the era of *Shijing*, *shui* and *he* were distinctive geographically: in the state of Qin, river was called *shui*, while in the state of Yong, river was called *he*. Given the expression of *jiu he* (nine rivers) in *Shangshu* and *zhi he* from *Zhuangzi*, it is not adventuresome to draw the conclusion that *he* as a common noun was used only in the east of China.

This is supported by the later appearance of *he* in historical documents. For example, the *Historical Atlas of China* shows that two rivers were named *he*, *Kou he* 滹河 and *Huchi he* 虢池河 on the map of the Qin Dynasty [10]. On the map of the West Han Dynasty [10], more rivers were named with *he*, such as *Huchi bie he* 虢池别河 (*Tuhai he* 徒骇河), *Guzhang he* 故障河, *Tunshi he* 屯氏河, *Zhangjia he* 张甲河, *Tunshi bie he* 屯氏别河, *Mingdu he* 鸣犊河, *Duma he* 笃马河, *Gu he* 派河, etc.. All of them were in East China. Why did *he* exist only in East China? This question cannot be answered unless the history of Chinese is taken into consideration.

### III. ETYMOLOGY OF OF HE

In history (or legend), the Han people had two main origins, Old Qiang and Old Yi. According to *Shi ji* 史记, the Huangdi tribe was a branch of Qiang, living in the northwestern part of China; the Yandi tribe was another branch of Qiang, whose clan's name was *Jiang*. It was the Yandi tribe that first moved eastward and developed primitive agriculture. The Huangdi tribe followed them, and joined the Yandi tribe at last, forming the Yan-Huang

tribal alliance 炎黄集团. Its successors, Xia, Zhou, Qin, etc., all had a close relationship with Qiang, too. According to *shiji* (《史记·六国年表》), “Yu 禹 rose from the West Qiang 西羌.” According to the *The Spring and Autumn of Wu and Yue* (《吴越春秋·越王无余外传》), Yu lived at a place call Shiniu 石钮 in West Qiang. In *Annals of Bamboo* (《竹书纪年》), Zhuanxu 颛琐's family name was Gaoyang 高阳, whose mother was Nüshu 女枢, who gave birth to Zhuanxu at Ruoshui 若水.... Zhuanxu's son was Gun 鲧, who gave birth to Yu at Shiniu. Even in the Shang and Zhou Dynasties many Qiang tribes joined the Xia people, such as *Zhou* and *Qin*. The Zhou people used to live in the region near Wugong of Shaanxi province today. their ancestress was Jiangyuan 姜原. Jiang descended from Qiang, too.

At that time, in the Yellow River Basin, besides the Yan-Huang tribal alliance, there was the Dong Yi tribal alliance 东夷集团 in the eastern part of China, which was powerful enough to found Shang Kingdom and unified the whole country later. The Yan-Huang tribal alliance, on their way moving eastward, encountered Dong Yi tribal alliance, and wars started. Through millennia of years' confrontation and incorporation, the two groups unified into one, that is, the early Han people.

Before their final unification, Yan-Huang tribal alliance and its successors confronted with Dong Yi tribal alliance and its successors for millennia. Fu Sinian, therefore, proposes a hypothesis “Yi in the east and Xia in the west”. He argues that during the dynasties of Xia, Shang, Zhou and the following decades, the history of Ancient China has two systems, which are actually reflected by the confrontation between Yi and Xia, as shown in the table below [11]:

The front battlefield		Endings	The side battlefield		Endings
East	West		East	West	
Yi 夷-----Xia 夏		Both sides had their victories and defeats. Yi once killed the king of Xia and Xia defeated Yi several times. But Xia never put down Yi.			
Shang 商-----Xia 夏		The east won.	Yin 殷-----Guifang 鬼方		The east won.
Yin 殷-----Zhou 周		The west won.			
Six States-----Qin 秦		The west won.			
Chen, Xiang----Qin 秦		The east won.	Huaiyi 淮夷----Zhou 周		Huaiyi failed at last, although it threatened Zhou several times.
Chu 楚-----Han 汉		The west won.			

This history is actually reflected in languages. Those Qiang-originated tribes and their offsprings brought the Old Qiang language to the east, where it contacted the Old Yi language and initiated language integration. Old Chinese thus appeared.

However, the integration of the two languages has gone through a long process. At the very beginning, it was mainly through the spread of *Yayan* 雅言 which was formed on the basis of the clannish language of Huangdi tribe. “It was not until King Yu 禹 of Xia that the clannish language of Huangdi tribe gradually developed into a common language of Yan-Huang tribal alliance, which laid the basis for the so-called *Yayan* in the Spring

and Autumn period and the Han language (i.e., Chinese) ever since the Han Dynasty” [12]. The Old Yi language did not disappear easily but was continuously spoken by the local people in the East until very late. Wang [9] suggests that Old Yi became a dialect in the Spring and Autumn period when it shared most vocabulary with other dialects but owned a separate phonological system.

This confrontation between the two systems found expression in their languages, i.e., Old Yi and Old Qiang, and *he* and *shui* are exactly their representatives of their respective language systems. (Actually there are many more. For example, *ren* 人 and *min* 民, with their proto

forms as *\*njin* and *\*r-mi(y)*, and coming from Old Yi and Old Tibeto-Burman, respectively. [13]) We know the Yan-Huang tribal alliance came from the west where the languages are Altaic and Tibeto-Burman dominantly. However, Yi was in the east where it neighbors the Old Yue language(s). Therefore, it is not adventuresome to assume that Old Yi and Old Qiang were two separate languages. How can we demonstrate that *he* and *shui* are from two languages? Their reconstructed forms provide a piece of evidence.

In the literature, the proto-form of *shui* ‘water’ in Old Chinese is assumed to be *\*qh<sup>h</sup>lji?* [14] or *\*eiwəi* [15], which, obviously, correspond to the river word in Modern Qiang *qhua:* (Mawo Qiang), *tsə* (Mawo Qiang) or *tsuə* (Taoping Qiang) [16]. In addition to *shui*, there are several basic Chinese words coming from Qiang evidently. One is *die* 爹 ‘dad’ from Guangyun 《广韵》: “爹, 陟邪切, 羌人呼父也”.

The east was the territory of Yi, and *he* should come from the Yi language. However, there is no Yi people as an ethnic group in the east nowadays, nor exists the Yi language. How can we tell that there existed a *he* in Old Yi? Actually, one descendant of this language can still be found today, that is, the Yi language spoken by the Yi minority living in the Southwest of China. According to some scholars [17-24], the Yi people in the Southwest today are the descendants of those who lived in the east in the Xia and Shang dynasties (or Dong Yi). Owing to the essential facts that the characters on Dinggong pottery scripts (丁公陶文) are close to the old characters of the Yi minority, and that the name of the Yi people is identical to that of Renfang 人方 (i.e., Dong Yi) in the Shang Dynasty,

It is reasonable for us to draw the conclusion that Dong Yi in Neolithic times and Xia and Shang dynasties are of the same race as the Yi people in the Southwest of China today. (In the classical documents of the Yi people, 夷 was the character used to refer to them themselves. This did not change until the foundation of Neo-china when people believed (incorrectly) that 夷 reflected racial discrimination, and replaced it with 彝. But until today the Yi people still have some objections to this change.) Besides, the fact that the Yi people today calls the Han people “Xia” also supports my argument. [2000]

In fact, Feng’s argument is supported by more evidence from historical documents, archaeology, linguistics (both cognate words and hieroglyphs), culture, etc.

First, according to historical records, as well as previous studies (e.g. [23]), there were two routes for the Old Yi people migrating from east to southwest. One moved first southwestwards from Shandong 山东 province to central China, then northwestwards to Sanwei 三危 and at last southwards to arrive Sichuan 四川 and Yunnan 云南 provinces; the other one moved first northwestwards from Shandong province to Shanxi 山西 province, then westwards to Shaanxi 陕西 province and at last southwards to arrive southeast of Gansu 甘肃 province. Many cultural heritages such as *bagua* 八卦 (the Eight Trigrams) and the ten-month solar calendar of Xia, indicate that ancestors of them used to live in Xia.

Therefore, the time when Modern Yi’s ancestors left East China was no later than the Shang dynasty (most probably, at the end of Xia) [23] [25].

Second, although the Old Yi people disappeared, the language they spoke has left certain traces in the Chinese language and in many historical documents. These traces also point to the Modern Yi Language in the southwest of China. For example, dozens of characters in some ancient Chinese documents have been recognized to be Yi words [26] and many ancient words from historical documents, such as *Shijing* and *Liji* (Rites of the Zhou) can be interpreted by Modern Yi [27-28].

Third, the Ancient hieroglyphs of Yi are helpful in interpreting some ancient hieroglyphs like the well-known Dinggong Pottery Scripts [18-22]. According to Liu [25], via references of hieroglyphs of the Yi language, many puzzling characters from oracle-bone inscriptions can get a better interpretation. For example, 𠂔 as one of the most controversial characters, has aroused much discussion. Yet until now, no satisfactory proposal has been put forward from the perspective of Modern Chinese and its writing system. However, with the help of hieroglyph of Yi, it can be recognized as 𠂔, which is pronounced as *khū* [29], meaning “how”. Then those phrases or sentences containing 𠂔 in oracle-bone inscriptions can get a better interpretation.

From the above discussion, it is not difficult to see that the Yi people in Southeast China today come from the Old Yi people who used to live in East China (Dongyi 东夷). When the Old Yi migrated southwestwards, they took their language and hieroglyphs (The hieroglyphs of Old Yi possibly were the official writing system of the Xia dynasty. This can explain why some scholars had the view that Old Yi was the ruler of Xia [30-31] to Southwest China, and handed them down from generation to generation for thousands of years.

As we have argued in last section, *he* was a common noun used only in East China, therefore, it is very possible that the common noun *he* came from Old Yi (as a substratal word), and that it still has certain connection with river word(s) of Modern Yi in the southwest. Interestingly, proto-form of *he* is similar to *water* of the Yi language. The proto-form of *he* is *\*ya* [15] which is very similar to *yua* [32] which means *water* in the Yi language spoken by the Yi people today. Besides, some other scholars would argue that the proto-form of *he* is *\*GAR* (e.g. *\*g’ar* [33], *\*gar* [5], *\*gal* [1-3], *\*gaal* [14], which corresponds with the proto-form of *water* in the Proto-Yi Branch (of the Sino-Tibetan Language Family) *\*ʔ-grak<sup>h</sup>* [34]. Thus, it is very possible that *he* came from the Old Yi language.

Now we can pose a hypothesis on how *he* came to be the proper name for the Yellow River. As discussed, many proper names for specific rivers in the Shang Dynasty, such as *jiang* 江, *he* 河, *fen* 汾, *wei* 渭, *ji* 济, *jing* 泾, *han* 汉, *luo* 洛, *ru* 汝, *huai* 淮, etc., may come from the languages of the local (aboriginal) tribes. For example, *Jiang* probably came from Old Yue in which it was a common noun, but became a proper name in Old Chinese. The same event might have happened to *he*, which was a common noun in Old Yi, and was borrowed by the Yan-Huang tribal alliance to indicate the Yellow River solely. Since *Yayan* was developed on the basis of the

language of the Yan-Huang trial alliance, it kept *he* as a proper name for the Yellow River. But among Old Yi speakers, *he* was still a common name for (big) rivers. This explains the contrast between *shui* and *he* in *Shijing*.

One may ask why in ancient historical documents many rivers in the east were also named *shui*, for example, *Qi shui* 淇水 in *Wei feng* ‘Wei Ballads’ and *Wen shui* 汶水 in *Qi feng* ‘Qi Ballads’ of *Shijing*. How can we explain this? Before we get down to such cases, one concept must be addressed again — *Yayan*. As is mentioned earlier, *Yayan* was formed on the basis of the language system in the western part of China. Originally it was the language of Huangdi tribe. It survived the Xia and Shang dynasties, keeping in contact with many tribal languages, and finally came into being in the period of the West Zhou Dynasty. “The pronunciation in the capital was the most standard; therefore it is named *ya* (elegant). The pronunciations in the states were not that standard and thus named *feng* (folk)” [35]. In the Spring and Autumn period, *Yayan* already enjoyed a great popularity among nobilities. For example, according to *Lunyu* (*Confucian Analects*), Confucius used *Yayan* in his reading and formal activities (子所雅言). That is to say, *Yayan* at that time had spread as far as the State Lu. Since *Yayan* was formed on the basis of the language system in the west (Old Qiang), and established finally in the west (the capital of Zhou was Haojing, which is near to Xi’an of Shaanxi province today), naturally it would take *shui* as a common noun for river. *He*, which came from the Yi language, was not accepted by *Yayan*.

Now it is time to account for the appearance of *Qi shui* and *Wen shui*. *Shijing* was compiled in the Spring and Autumn period, when *Yayan* was the official language used by the ruling class for formal activities. It is not difficult to imagine that they were sure to use *Yayan* when they named rivers.

The popularity of *Yayan* among the upper class, however, did not mean that the language system in the east had disappeared. In *Liji*, it is recorded that “The people in five directions cannot understand each other and may have different desires (五方之民言语不通, 嗜欲不同).” That is to say, although *Yayan* enjoyed popularity among the upper class, the folk, however, usually used their own languages/dialects. This is why *he* was still used then. *Shijing* exactly recorded that even the noble could not avoid speaking a certain local language or dialect. “Since Confucius grew up in the state of Lu, he could not avoid speaking the Lu language. Only when he chants *Shijing*, reads *Shangshu* and cites *Liji*, he must make his pronunciation standard” [35].

#### IV. THE RISE OF HE

When Old Qiang encountered Old Yi, their lexical items would inevitably compete to be the dominant ones. This is exactly demonstrated by the wars between *he* and *shui*. Below we will look into the historical documents to have a general overview of this war. Due to the fact that there is no faithful historical account before the Zhou Dynasty, we will start from Zhou.

##### A. *Shui* advancing while *he* retreating

As mentioned above, *shui* came from the language system in the western part of China (Some readers may point out that there was another river word, *chuan* 川, in the West China. But *chuan* actually was a variety of *shui*. [36]), and *he* came from the language system in the east. Ever since Xia and Shang, *Yayan* was the official language that was popular among the upper class. In the West Zhou Dynasty, especially, *shui* was overwhelming. From the *Historical Atlas of China* we can see that in the West Zhou Dynasty, the Spring and Autumn period, and the Warring period, all the rivers were named with *shui*. This does not necessarily mean that *he* was extinct. It is imaginable that *he* at that time must have certain kind of influence among the common people. Otherwise in the Warring period, Zhuangcius would not call Qiantang River as *Zhi he*.

##### B. *He* replacing *shui*

How could *he* come from behind and replace *shui* as the official form? The whole process can be divided into several phases:

**First, *shui*’s losing its dominant status.** Ever since 770BC, the strong states started to contend for hegemony, splitting the whole country into many small kingdoms, and creating many political centers. The change of the political center resulted in *Yayan*’s loss of the soil where it was rooted. The rising of the states means that it should be possible for some local words (e.g. *he*) to take this chance and sneak into *Yayan*, thus making local *Yayan* develop. This happened not only within the spoken system, but also in the written system [37].

**Second, reanalysis of *Huang he* (Yellow River).** In the Spring and Autumn period, *he* started to be used as a common word. It is interesting to notice that at the same time the Yellow River was also reanalyzed. For example, the lower reaches of the Yellow River (the part near *Luoyang* 洛阳 and *Gongxian* 巩县) was named *Nan he* 南河 (the South River) [10]. In the Warring States period, the reach of the Yellow River in Inner Mongolia today was called *Bei he* 北河 (the North River), and the reach between *Bei he* and *Nan he* was called *Xi he* 西河 (literally, the West River) [10]. The division and reanalysis of the Yellow River in fact meant that the proper name *he* was not that proper any more. This inevitably helped the spread of *he* as a common word. It happened that at the very time, the number of people who used *shui* as a common noun dropped dramatically.

**Third, rising of *he*.** The rulers of Qin took pains and efforts to build up a big empire, but the warring in years resulted in a dramatic decrease in the number of *Yayan*-speakers. One is that many local people in the former Qin state who spoke *Yayan* died in the war; besides, the noble in the other states were killed or forced to flee from war (and became common people soon and picked up certain local language or dialect). Those lucky survivors, however, were forced to leave their home state in the east to reside in the capital of Qin. “(Emperor Qinshihuang) moves one hundred and twenty thousand powerful and wealthy people to Xianyang (徙天下豪富于咸阳十二万户)” (*Shiji-Qinshihuang Benji*). The fact that the population of *Yayan*-speakers reduced sharply

means that the dominance of *Yayan* was further going down. Taking advantage of this chance, many words of common people entered the written language and gradually became dominant. *He* was one of them.

**Fourth, spreading of *he*.** As mentioned above, in the Qin Dynasty, some river names with *he* like *Kou he* 濠河, *Huchi he* 虔池河, etc., appeared in the north on the map while in the West Han Dynasty, even more *he*-named rivers appeared, as shown above. From then on, the bounds of *he* kept enlarging. It even spread to the southwest. For example, in the East Han Dynasty, there was *Dieyu he* 楮榆河 [10]; in the Tang Dynasty, even Yarlung Zangbu River was named *Zang he* 藏河 [10].

**Fifth, the establishing of *he*'s status.** As more and more *he*-named rivers appeared and their bounds widened, Yellow River gave up its *shui* name and picked up a *he* name, *Huang he* 黄河, in the South and North Dynasty [10]. This event smashed the 'firm front' of *shui*. In the following hundreds of years, almost all the rivers in the north changed their names into *he*. Today, on the map of North China, few rivers with *shui* name are left.

## V. CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have provided pieces of evidence from linguistics, ethnology, history, and geography to put forward the hypothesis on the etymology of river words in Chinese that *he* came from the Old Yi language, while *shui*, a word of the Old Qiang language, was dominant at the beginning of Early Old Chinese, but was gradually replaced in the long run of the history of Chinese. Much evidence from linguistics, anthropology and history shows that *he* came from Old Yi, which was incorporated into Proto-Chinese, and replaced *shui* which was a river word from Old Qiang. In this progress, the separatist regimes in the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period and the following unification of the Qin empire played an important role.

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