

The identification of the character for “happiness” in Ancient Chinese writing*

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Abstract:

The aim of the present article is to contribute to the debate concerning the identification of the group of variants 𠄎, 𠄎, 𠄎, 𠄎, 𠄎, 𠄎, 𠄎 in the Oracle Bones Inscriptions (OBI) of the Shang period. Apart from those considered by Yu (1996) as unidentifiable for the time being, these graphs have been identified either as 福 *fu*² “ritual; (later) happiness” according to Luo (1927) or as 裸 *guan*⁴ “libation” after Shima (1953). The pioneer studies of these two specialists in OBI have subsequently become the two principal rival interpretations of the variant forms in question.

I shall focus my discussion on the identification of the OBI variants listed above as 裸 *guan*⁴ “libation”, and argue that the graphical form 裸 used for 隸定 *liding* is not valid, and should cede its place to 福 which is supported by some new observations.

Keywords: 福 *fu*², 裸 *guan*⁴, rite name, graphical variants

1. Introduction

The discovery of the OBI from the Shang dynasty revealed a Chinese writing system relatively advanced for its time but with still fluctuating writing rules, as witnessed by the number of highly iconic graphical variants. The graphical identification work of the OBI was made possible by the preservation and stability of the Chinese writing system throughout historical times and by the richness of information on the archaic period transmitted by the Classics. I would like to draw attention to the problem of the reliability of some graphs in the transmitted Classics. This problem was raised very early by Wang Yirong (王懿榮, 1845–1900), when he pointed out that 文 *wen*² was mistaken as 寧 *ning*², (or rather 寧 *ning*² according to Qiu, 1988, 164), in the name of 文王 King Wen, erroneously written as 寧王 *Ning*² *wang*² in two chapters of the *Shangshu* 尚書. The “heart”

component present in both ancient forms of these two graphs explains the confusion. In the same cast of mind, I would question the reliability of the graph 裸 *guan*⁴ “libation” in the *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字 (completed around AD 100; henceforth as *Shuowen*), as well as the validity of its alleged identification in OBI. Nowadays, the OBI variants group 𩚑, 𩚒, 𩚓, 𩚔, 𩚕, 𩚖, 𩚗 is still identified either with 福 *fu*² according to Luo (1927), or with 裸 *guan*⁴ according to Shima (1953). The latter’s point of view has the favour of most present-day scholars, as can be seen in Jia (1998), Zhang (2007) or, more significantly, in the latest version of the reference book *Jiaguwen bian*, edited by Liu et al. (2009), providing us with a large range of graphical variants of 裸 *guan*⁴. My aim is to shed light on the hotly debated question of the identification of this graph and to propose what seems to me a more appropriate hypothesis from an epigraphic point of view. Let us first see what we know for sure about the graphical form of 裸 *guan*⁴.

The 裸 *guan*⁴ graph appears in the *Shuowen*, written in “small seal” (小篆 *xiao*³ *zhuan*⁴) as 𩚑 and glossed “aspersion ritual. Graph made up of the ‘altar’ radical and the phonetic indicator *guo*³” (灌祭也。從示，果聲).¹ The transmitted versions of some Classics, such as the *Shangshu*, *Shijing*, *Zhouli* 周禮, *Zuo zhuan* 左傳, *Liji* 禮記 and *Guoyu* 國語, offer different occurrences of the 裸 *guan*⁴ graph used in the sense of “libation” or “to pour alcohol”. In the *Shangshu*, *Zhouli* and *Liji*, this graph has the particularity of being written either as 裸 *guan*⁴, or simply 果 *guan*⁴, or even to be replaced by 灌 *guan*⁴, as in the following examples: *Shangshu*, Chapter *Luogao* 洛誥: “*wang ru da shi guan*” 王入大室裸 “The King entered the grand apartment, and poured out the libation.” (Translated by Legge 1865, vol. III, part. II: 452); *Zhouli*, Chapter *Chunguan*, *Zongbo* 春官宗伯: “*Fan ji si, bin ke yi shi jiang zan guo*” 凡祭祀、賓客，以時將瓊果 “In general, during sacrifices or receptions of foreign visitors, under certain circumstances, a vessel of alcohol would be offered for libations.”², or *Liji* 禮記, Chapter *Liqi* 禮器: “*guan*⁴ *yong*⁴ *yu*⁴ *chang*⁴” 灌用鬱鬯 “[When princes went to the courts of one another,] fragrant spirits were used in libations.” (Translated by Legge, 1885) Moreover, according to a footnote by Zheng Xuan (鄭玄, 127–200) in one of his *Zhouli* commentaries, 裸 *guan*⁴ could also be written as 𩚑 *guan*⁴.

To this day the oldest attestation of 裸 *guan*⁴ is in the *Shuowen*, but so far it has never been corroborated by any epigraphic or palaeographic data. A very enigmatic situation indeed.

2. Supporters of the 裸 *guan*⁴ identification in the OBI

Guo (1937) proposed for the first time to read as 裸 *guan*⁴ the following cases of OBI variants as documented in *Yinxu cuibian*, henceforth *Cui* and *Jiaguwen heji*, henceforth *Heji*, under the forms 𠩺 (*Cui* 245 = *Heji* 22894), 𠩻 (*Cui* 322 = *Heji* 30303) and 𠩼 (*Cui* 493 = *Heji* 31050), while in the following cases he only re-wrote the OBI graphs without 裸 *guan*⁴: 𠩽 (*Cui* 418 = *Heji* 34382), 𠩿 (*Cui* 520 = *Heji* 34606) and 𠪀 (*Cui* 491 = *Heji* 30310) as 𠩺, 𠩻 and 𠩼. In the absence of any commentary on his part, it is difficult to explain his position, but his different treatment of these OBI graphs hints at an underlying problem or at least at an evident embarrassment.³

One has trouble seeing the similarities between 裸 *guan*⁴ “libation” and the three variants 𠩺, 𠩻 and 𠩼 that Guo (1937) brought together. It is clear that the very pictographic nature of these three variants influenced his choice. They are strong pictographic representations of wine vessels: in the first case, a wine container fit with a pouring lip from which some drops fall; in the second case, a simple wine vessel. The mainly ritual semantic context in which the graphs appear is also the same. Most often, we find them in the same type of phrases in OBI, showing clearly that they are the name of a rite for ancestors during which alcohol is used. They might also be used as a verb. This ritual was mainly conducted indoors by the king, for instance in the ancestor hall,⁴ and could be followed by the sacrifice of animal offerings. (see Jia, 1998, 105).

Shima (1953) was one of the rare scholars to take the trouble to explain to a certain extent his point of view on the subject, as did more recently Jia (1998). Both authors made use of Guo’s works, while covering a much larger range of graphical variants.⁵ Shima justified his position merely by saying that “it is possible to infer from graphical analysis that the graph means ‘to pour’”⁶ and then to identify it as 裸 *guan*⁴, meaning “(to make) libation”.

As in Jia’s remark, Guo and some others only emphasize the semantic aspect of the problem: “Among those who interpret the character as *guan*⁴, there are pioneers such as Guo Moruo and Qu Wanli. However, they base their arguments on the meaning of the graph in OBI, without a clear notion of its graphical construction.”⁷ Recently Zhang (2007) explains that it is beyond doubt that before being an ideo-phonogram, made up of 示 *shi*⁴ ‘altar’, and 果 *guo*³, the phonetic indicator, this graph 裸 *guan*⁴ was initially pictographic. For him, this is a classical development and he provides some examples that he considers similar to the case of 裸 *guan*⁴. According to him, the “altar” component is enough to demonstrate the link between 裸 and 𠩺.⁸ I am not convinced by his explanation,

for the mere presence of the common 示 *shi*⁴ “altar” radical in some OBI variants and in the modern graphical form of 裸 *guan*⁴ is too weak an argument to deduce that it is actually 裸 *guan*⁴. In fact the same argument could as well be used to prove that it is 福 *fu*². In both cases, it is not convincing (moreover, the examples given by Zhang by way of comparison are not of the same kind, for intermediate epigraphic data on bronze or bamboo allow us to trace their graphical evolution, as opposed to 裸 *guan*⁴ which is not attested before *Shuowen*).

Jia (1998) considers 裸 *guan*⁴ as an “ideogram made up of ‘altar’, 升 *gong*³ ‘two hands’ and 瓚 *zan*⁴. Some variants have the two hands, now we know that the 升 *gong*³ ‘two hands’ component has no relation with 福 *fu*²”.⁹ Unable to justify the gap between the ancient OBI forms and the later form of 裸 *guan*⁴, Jia has no other solution than to declare that it was initially a 會意 *hui*⁴*yi*⁴ “ideogram”. I have already expressed my reservations about this process. As for the argument of the absence of 升 *gong*³ “two hands” in the 福 *fu*² graph, it has no credibility either, insofar as there is no more trace of 升 *gong*³ in the small seal form of 福 *fu*² than in the alleged 裸 *guan*⁴. In OBI as well as in bronze inscriptions, we can also encounter variant forms where the two hands are reduced to one, as in 𠄎 (Heji 27115) and 𠄎 (毓祖丁卣, see *Yin Zhou jinwen jicheng* – hereafter abbreviated as *Jicheng* – 10.5396). Moreover, the question of the presence or absence of the 升 *gong*³ component concerns also other OBI graphs such as 登 *deng*¹ 𠄎; 𠄎 (Heji 8564, 4647), yet without having any effect. None of the explanations proposed until now to argue for the identification of 裸 *guan*⁴ in OBI is satisfactory. Let us now see what are the bases for the identification of 福 *fu*² initially proposed by Luo (1910).

3. Supporters of the 福 *fu*² identification in the OBI

The 福 *fu*² graph was very early identified by Luo (1910) under the form 𠄎. Later, in 1927, he considered the group of OBI graphs 𠄎, 𠄎, 𠄎, 𠄎, 𠄎, 𠄎, 𠄎 as variants of 福 *fu*². He explained that it was the graphical representation of two hands holding a 尊 *zun*¹ vessel for offering alcohol towards an altar; this graph could be reduced to the mere representation of a vessel and an altar, or even simply to a vessel. In Shang times, in most cases, it stood for rites through which royal families hoped to gain protection and blessings from their ancestors; this explains its later semantic extension to “happiness”. Luo noticed that the 福 *fu*² graph on bronze could also be written without the “altar” radical, and that in some of its variants the 酉 *you*³ and 𠄎 *fu*² graphs were interchangeable.

Sun (1934), Chen (1956: 569) and, curiously enough, Guo (1933: 260) first shared Luo's opinion. After doubting this point of view in 1937, as seen above, Guo (1959) finally returned to his first analysis, considering that "the graph on a Shang dynasty bronze is the primitive form of 福 fu^2 and is very common in OBI". He then quoted two other occurrences on bronzes, 𠄎 and 𠄎 (see *Jicheng* 5.2763 and 10.5396).¹⁰ This change of mind of Guo deserves more attention in the present debate.¹¹

4. Hypothesis confirming the identification of 福 fu^2 in OBI

Jia (1998) remarks that among more than twenty OBI variants of the graph in question, the four more frequent ones are 𠄎 (*Heji* 30928), 𠄎 (*Heji* 34624), 𠄎 (*Heji* 32979) and 𠄎 (*Heji* 25599). These four variants illustrate the liberty taken by the scribes in the representation of the wine vessel (see also 𠄎 *Heji* 15843; 𠄎 *Heji* 15829; 𠄎 *Heji* 15871; 𠄎 *Heji* 25393), while some others are in my opinion even more characteristic: 𠄎 (*Heji* 34381); 𠄎 (*Heji* 30931); 𠄎 (*Heji* 27543). The variability of the representation of the alcohol vessel in all these OBI variants reverberates in bronze inscriptions where variants of the 福 fu^2 graph display at least three different components representing alcohol vessels, namely 酉 you^3 (𠄎 middle Zhou, 𠄎 end of Zhou and 𠄎 Chunqiu), 𠄎 fu^2 (𠄎 middle Zhou and 𠄎 Chunqiu) and 缶 fou^3 (𠄎 Chunqiu).¹² In the vast majority of the OBI variants of 福 fu^2 , the accent is on the pouring part that can even be emphasized by a few falling drops.¹³

It is difficult to follow those who want to see there a 壺 hu^2 or a 瓚 zan^4 . Insofar as no epigraphic proof is available, these two graphs are hard to identify in our variants (see 壺 hu^2 , written 𠄎 in OBI and 瓚 zan^4 on bronze 𠄎). Finally, the component of a wine vessel common to all these OBI variants, but identified by some as a 尊 zun^1 (see Luo, 1910), by others as a 壺 hu^2 (see Wu, 1934 or Shima, 1953) or a 瓚 zan^4 (see Jia, 1998), underscores that what is important is less the type of vessel in question than the fact that alcohol is pouring from it.

I strongly suspect that the majority of the highly iconic variants of 福 fu^2 in OBI and bronzes until the end of Zhou were used to mean a rite name, consisting in pouring alcohol as an offering to the ancestors, while the ideo-phonographic forms made up of the "altar" radical and the phonetic indicator 𠄎 fu^2 , attested on bronze since early Zhou, were used to mean "happiness". This notion was already implicit in OBI, insofar as the 福 fu^2 ritual was performed to secure the protection and good will of the ancestors. It remains to confirm whether 福 fu^2 is ever attested as "rite name" in related documents. Indeed, such an attestation is rare,

nevertheless a case is found in Tang (1986). The ideo-phonographic form of 福 fu^2 𡇗, used in the sense of a rite name, according to Tang, is found in a bronze inscription dated from the early Zhou. His paraphrase of the line in question is as follows: “Illustrate my Fu-rite and ceremonies of oath of alliance”. This attestation of his was recently adopted by Luo (2007).¹⁴

In the *Shuowen*, the 福 fu^2 graph is glossed “protection; divine help. Graph made up of the ‘altar’ radical 示 shi^4 and the phonetic indicator 畐 fu^2 ”.¹⁵ The small seal form of 福 fu^2 in the *Shuowen* comes directly from its most common bronze form 𡇗 attested at least since early Zhou in the sense of “happiness”, as well as from the form on bamboo slips of the state of Qin.¹⁶ The small seal 福 fu^2 given by Xu Shen suggests that he knew of Qin bamboo slips or even of bronze inscriptions where this graph is well attested under such a form.

Recently discovered bamboo data, dating back to the 4th century BC and similar to Chu script, make me wonder whether Xu Shen also knew of bamboo slips on which the 福 fu^2 could have been written with the “altar” radical under the phonetic indicator 畐 fu^2 , as found in the Shanghai slips 𡇗 (*Kong³ zi³ shi¹ lun²* 孔子詩論 12.13. See Li, 2007, 15).¹⁷ Therefore I make the assumption that Xu Shen, or even others before him as suggested by Wang (1923; see footnote 1), had seen a bamboo slip where 福 fu^2 in the sense of “rite name” was written with a form akin to 𡇗. However, such a form could be mistaken for 果 because of graphical blending of the two components 示 “altar” and 木 “tree” in the lower parts and that of the vessel belly of 畐 with the top of 果 on the upper parts. This explanation sheds light on Wang’s error when he wrote “the 果 graph, attested in the *Zhouli* in the sense of 裸 $guan^4$, must be its oldest form”. Actually, sure of the reliability of the Classics, Wang was misled by the well known fact that a graphical form with a radical has often been preceded by a form without it, as in the examples of 禘 di^4 or 祿 lu^4 that he himself mentioned. Unfortunately, the case of 果 is a false one. In considering it as a case parallel to that of 禘 di^4 and 祿 lu^4 , Wang failed to suspect that this so-called 果 in its ancient form actually contains the categorial component 示 shi^4 “altar”.

I am convinced that the small seal form is the result of an error in reproducing a variant of the 福 fu^2 written on bamboo, signifying the name of a ritual and wrongly identified as 果 guo^3 . Yet being aware of the ritual meaning of the graph, Xu Shen might have restored the “altar” radical, and this explains the entry of 裸 $guan^4$ in the *Shuowen*. The resemblance in ancient pronunciation between 果 and 灌 which was used for glossing 裸 $guan^4$ certainly contributed to creating the illusion that there was indeed such a graph.¹⁸ I therefore propose to consider 裸

*guan*⁴ as a complete fabrication out of the character 福 *fu*² on bamboo slips, coined for conveying its initial meaning which had become obsolete by the end of Zhou. The notion of “happiness” signified by 福 *fu*² is only a semantic extension from its initial meaning, namely a ritual for the ancestors in order to gain their help and protection. The semantic evolution of 福 *fu*² from a “name of ritual” to the abstract notion of “happiness” finds an interesting parallel case in 尊 *zun*¹, also the name of a ritual in OBI, later extended to mean “to respect; to venerate”.

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* My gratitude first goes to Prof. Yau Shun-chiu for our fruitful discussions at different stages of the preparation of this paper. I would also like to thank Dr. Geneviève Barman for her comments on the French version, and last but not least for kindly rendering it into English.

¹ According to Wang (1923), a comment by Mao Chan 毛萇 on the *Shijing* 詩經 should have been the source of the gloss of 灌 *guan*⁴ “name of a ritual” in *Shuowen*, because Mao wrote: “*guan*⁴, pouring aromatic alcohol (毛詩文王傳云。裸。灌鬯也), while the *Shuowen* noted: “aspersion rite” (灌祭也). It has to be noted that Mao Chan was a scholar of the State of Zhao during the Zhanguo period. Thus, this case demonstrates how comments on classics influenced Xu Shen, author of the *Shuowen*.

² This is indirectly translated from Biot’s French version (1851): “En général, lorsqu’il y a des sacrifices, des réceptions de visiteurs étrangers, il offre en certaines circonstances le vase consacré pour faire les libations”.






³ Guo was not the only scholar to show signs of hesitation in the course of treating these variants. Tang (1986) presents even more glaring contradictions in his analyses of bronze inscriptions, when he mixes up 裸 *guan*⁴ with 福 *fu*² (see Huang, 1990).

⁴ Notably 宗 *zong*¹ “the temple of ancestors”, 大室 *da*⁴ *shi*⁴ “the great apartment (i.e., the middle hall of the temple).




⁵ The other variants are beyond the scope of the present article.







⁶ The original quotation is: “從字形分析，可知字有灌注之義”。

⁷ The original of Jia’s quotation is: “釋為裸者，較早的有郭沫若、屈萬里等先生。但他們的依據多是‘尋釋卜辭’文意，對裸字的字形結構並不十分清楚” Qu (1961) writes: “Guo Moruo interprets the graph as *guan*⁴. According to its contextual content in OBI, his interpretation is preferable.” (郭釋裸，尋釋卜辭，以釋裸之說為長)












⁸ The original quotation is as follows: “ 是會意字，是以形表義的；而裸則是形聲字，示是表意的，果是表音的。一個字，原來是以形表義的，後來被改為形聲字，這樣的例子太多了。例如耜原作（甲骨文），野原作，何原作（金文）等等。裸和都從示，仍能看出兩者在字形上的關係。

⁹ In his own words: “裸是一個會意，從示、從升、從瓚。所以一些異體從升，而福與升無關”。

¹⁰ The original quotation of Guo (1959: 1) is: “福字作，當是福之初字。卜辭中多有之。我方鼎云‘遣福二’作，毓且丁卣云‘王在虞降令曰歸福于我多高口’作.

¹¹ In 1937, Guo’s reproduction of  (Cui 137 = Heji 22630) as  strongly suggests that he had a viewpoint different from that of Ye (1933). In fact, Ye assimilated the variants in the OBI with , the ancient variant (*guwen* 古文) of  *you*³ mentioned in the *Shuowen*, whereas Guo took great care to add a distinctive feature to the upper part of the component 酉 *you*², underlying the pouring lip. Moreover, Guo (1933) considered  in the OBI to be borrowed for  *you* (酉假為頤). Consequently Shima (1953: 498) was wrong when he said “Guo adopted once again Ye’s explanation” (郭沫若又從葉釋).


¹² See respectively  鼎 (*Jicheng* 4.2280), 伯其鬲 (*Jicheng* 9.4446), 曾師季盤 (*Jicheng* 16.10138), 卣 (*Jicheng* 10.5411), 國差 (*Jicheng* 16.10361) and 黃子壺 (*Jicheng* 15.9663). Concerning the variant in the last vessel, see Maréchal, 2004.

¹³ We note that the OBI variants such as  (Heji 3187),  (Heji 10613) recall certain forms of 福 *fu*² in bronze inscriptions of the later period, composed of 示 *shi*⁴ “altar” and 酉 *you*³. This latter graph appears in a great variety of forms in OBI when it is used alone , ,  (Heji 8992, 14238, 32935, Heji bu 114) or in composition as in 酒 *jiu*³: ,  (Heji 9560, 28231), 尊 *zun*¹: ,  (Heji 21223, 33140, 4059) or 酉 *you*: ,  (Heji 25938, 32087).

¹⁴ Tang rendered the phrase in modern Chinese as: “明我的福祭盟誓等禮”。

¹⁵ The *Shuowen* gloss is: “祐也。從示，畐聲”。

¹⁶ See Zhang (1994, 2) 福 秦律 66; 福 日書乙。

¹⁷ In general, it is the component 酉 *you*³ that is written on top of the character “altar” as in .

¹⁸ It is interesting to underline that the categorial component “water” present in certain OBI and bronze variants was preferred to that of “altar” to mean the 福 *fu*² ritual. Subsequently, this led to the use of 裸 for 裸 *guan*⁴ as mentioned by Zheng Xuan (see the end of the first section of the present paper).