The Chinese have traditionally drawn on one or several stories to explain the origin of their writing.¹ Cāng Jié is known in China as the scribe who invented writing, after observing the marks left on the ground by birds and animals. Modern specialists of the Chinese writing system all agree to say that this is only a legend,² but the history of the legend of Cāng Jié is nevertheless interesting to retrace for several reasons. The theme is relatively well-documented, and allows us to understand how the legend was constructed and became established; it also provides us with a 'window' into how writing was perceived by the different authors who have referred to it.

This legend broaches the fundamental problem of writing. Ancient Chinese authors recognized the importance of this topic, and sought to explain the origin of writing within their own conceptual framework, or to give it a particular role, before they considered it to be at the very heart of the government.³ This is what we will see in the citations presented in the following pages. At the same time we will be able to understand how, having fluctuated in different directions depending on the authors, the legend has benefited from the written form to become propagated and almost rigidified since the Eastern Hàn.

¹ For the different legends on the origins of Chinese writing, see, for example, Táng Lán 1979:54, Sūn Júnxì 1991:20, Zhāng Yúyín & Xià Zhōnghuà 2001:52.
² The name is written as often with the component 'grass': 䑥, as without it: 倉.
³ See, for example, Táng Lán 1979:51 et seq.; Sūn Júnxì 1991:17-18, Qíu Xīgūi 1988:28 (English translation:44). It is interesting to note that, according to Qíu, writing was invented by the labouring classes, but that, later, shamans and diviners, who were serving the governing classes, must have played a part in its development.
⁴ This is what we will find in Hūánànzì 20 and in the Shuòwén 15. Cf. Infra:143, 149-153.
Căng Jié, the inventor of writing?

Căng Jié's name first appears with Xúnzī in the 3rd century before our era. One needs to note however that Xúnzī (c. 298-235 B.C.) mentioned Căng Jié not as the inventor of writing, but as someone who appreciated it and was deeply involved in it:

Thus, those who have been fond of writing have been many, yet that Căng Jié alone has been remembered is due to his unity of purpose. Those who have been fond of husbandry have been many yet that Hòujì alone has been remembered is due to his unity alone.5 (Knoblock 1994 vol.3:107)

In this passage, Căng Jié is presented alongside other mythical heroes such as Hoùjì, Kuí, and Shùn, to whom one owes the sowing of seeds, music and the sense of duty (all essential features for social life). This suggests the major importance that Xúnzī attributed to writing. But, at the same time, one should note that in the following part of the text Xúnzī mentioned Chuí, Fúyóu, Xïzhòng, and Chéng Dù whom he considered to be true inventors (of the bow, the arrow, the chariot, or the harness), while he insisted that it was not they who mastered the arts of archery or charioteering, since mastery of these techniques or arts required concentration and perseverance.

In other words, for Xúnzī, there was a clear difference between creation and mastery of an art or a technique; Căng Jié did not come under the category of the inventors, but of those who committed themselves or assiduously practiced a specialization.

Hán Fëi (c. 280-233), who studied with Xúnzī, returned to the theme of Căng Jié whom he presented as the inventor of writing:

古者蒼顔之作書也，自環者謂之私，背私謂之公，公私之相背也，乃蒼顔

In ancient times, when Cāng Jié invented writing, he signified that which turns around itself by (the character) sī 己, 'selfish, personal', and turning one's back against 'selfishness', he designated with (the character) gōng 公, 'public'.

Cāng Jié must have known about the opposition between 'selfishness' and 'public'.

To show how opposed were the notions of 'public' and 'personal', Hán Fēi referred to the writing system evoking briefly he who had invented it and who had consciously reproduced this opposition in the very representations of the graphs. One can see here the idea of a profound correspondence between written signs and reality.

In the Lǔshǐ chuānqū (239 B.C.), under the patronage of Lǔ Bùwéi, Cāng Jié was also regarded as the inventor of writing. This time, together with Xīzhòng, Hòuji, Gāoyáo, Kūnwú and Gǔn of Xià, he was one of a group of six men whose inventions were outstanding.

Xīzhòng invented the chariot, Cāng Jié writing, Hòuji plant cultivation, Gāoyáo corporal punishment, Kūnwú ceramic vessels, and Gǔn of Xià city walls. What these six men invented met needs, nonetheless they are not part of the Dao of ruling.

Just as for Xúnzì, writing retains its 'civilizing' role and Cāng Jié is only a man, but now he belongs in the category of inventors, those on whom a good ruler can depend for governing.

A bit later in the same chapter, the text mentions a list of 20 officials (guān 官) who assisted the ruler in governing, thanks to their inventions (of the 60-day cycle, of the calendar, of different forms of divination; of clothing; of bows; of the market; of fermented wine; of houses; of boats; of wells; of mortars for grinding grain, of the harness; of driving the chariots; of domesticating oxen; of charts; of medicinal treatments and divination stalks). Among these, one finds a certain Shī Huáng 史皇 who was

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6 Hán Fēi relies on the 'ancient graph' sī 己, 'selfish, personal', which is more or less written like 己, to show that the two graphs representing the words 'selfish, personal' and 'public' express this opposition of meanings in their graphic structure. According to Hán Fēi the graph for the word 'public' is built up from the components 'to turn one's back' and 'selfish, personal'.

7 This perception of the script recalls the famous examples of the interpretation of graphs in the Zuòzhuan such as: "Thus from the graphic point of view, when one inverts 'correct' one obtains 'fall short.' (Zuòzhuan 24 Xuăn Gōng 15, SSJZZ:1888a). See Bottéro 2004:15 et seq.

8 Note that only the names of Cāng Jié and Hòuji are taken up from the Xúnzì.

9 Lǔshǐ chuānqū jiào shì 17, Jūn shòu 君守:1051.

10 Lǔshǐ chuānqū jiào shì 19 Wǔ gōng 勿躬:1078.
described as the author of charts. Modern commentators identify Shī Huáng with Cāng Jié basing themselves on the fact that Gāo Yǒu 高誘 (168-212), in his commentary on a passage of the Huáinánzǐ 玉篇 invoking Shī Huáng (see below), combined them together into a single person. Yet neither their names nor their inventions ('charts' and 'writings', respectively) coincide with each other. Indeed it is hard to see why it would be a matter of one and the same person.

As Chén Qíyóu 陳奇猷 has pointed out, this chapter of the Lǔshì chuánqìu 楚國史記 presents theories of the so-called Legalist school. In other words, it is interesting to note that up to this time, the legend of Cāng Jié, inventor of writing, seems to have been confined to the milieu of the Legalist school, or at least to have been of interest only to them—which is certainly not contradicted by the next author we will consider.

Towards 213 B.C. Lì Sì 李斯 (c. 280-208), the minister of Qín 秦始皇帝, wrote a 'manual of characters' in 7 sections, Cāng Jié piàn 蒼頌篇, in order to propagate his policy of unifying writing, which fell within a more general context of the suppression of regional particularisms. From the first sentence of his text, Lì Sì repeated the formula "Cāng Jié invented writing" 蒼頌作書. Unfortunately we do not have the full text of Lì Sì but, from manuscript fragments of the Hán period - dating from 90 B.C. to 30 A.D. - that were discovered in Jūyán 居延 in the 1930s and, particularly, in the 1970s, the subsequent text stated that writing was invented by Cāng Jié in order to provide instruction to later generations.

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11 See Chén Qíyóu and Mǎ Xúlín in Lǔshì chuánqìu 經國史記:1084, note 21. The legend of Cāng Jié, at the same time scribe of the Yellow Emperor and inventor of writing, was solidly established in the 2nd century, with the result that, in his commentaries on the Huáinánzǐ and the Lǔshì chuánqìu, Gāo Yǒu 高誘 (168-212) quite naturally associates Cāng Jié with Shī Huáng and describes him as a scribe of the Yellow Emperor.

12 According to Mǎ Xúlín (ibid), shù 書 and tú 圖 represent the same thing. But Táng Lán 唐蘭 (1979:52) observes that the famous sentence, "The Yellow River has produced the Charts and the Luō River the Writings", shows that these two terms had different meanings, see infra:147.

13 The Hùnhū 30:1719 and the Shuōwén 15A (Shuōwén jìézi zhù 15A 10a) say that Lǐ Si's text was followed by Zhào Gāo's 趙高 Yuǎnlì 彰歷 in 6 sections, and by Hūwū Jǐng's 胡毋敬 Bóxué 博學 in 7 sections to form what was also called the Cāng Jié piàn in 20 sections. During the Hán time, the whole text was modified and expanded to 55 sections with 60 characters each. See Bottéro 2003:101 et seq.

14 That is to say, along the Edsin gol river in western Mongolia, to the north of the Zhāngyěa 張掖 and Jùquán 酒泉 districts, during the 1930 and 1972-76 archeological excavations. See Lǎo Gān 1960:75 and Wēnwǔ 1978 1:1-13.
Cāng Jié invented writing to instruct the following generations. The young children politely receive instruction, they are diligent and cautious, apply themselves to recitation and memorization, without resting day and night. If they want to serve and become scribes they will have to surpass the others in accountancy and administration, and it is by standing out in the crowd that they will be distinguished from the others. At the beginning it will be hard work, but in the end there will necessarily be gratifying satisfaction. Diligence, loyalty and discretion will be rewarded […]

Since the Cāng Jié piān was revised during the Hàn dynasty, we cannot be certain that this passage came only from the hand of Lī Sì. Nevertheless, the first sentence "Cāng Jié invented writing" provided the title that was registered in the Hànshū, and therefore, should not according to me be put into question. In other words, for Lī Sì as for Hán Fēi and the Lūshì chuānqiu, Cāng Jié was clearly the inventor of writing.

As one can see in his well-known memorial to the Emperor Qín Shīhuángdì, Lī Sì explained how the scholars were denigrating the present, basing themselves on the ancient texts, and how threatening this was to the Emperor. Lī Sì here shows his ambivalent attitude towards writing. He feared what could be transmitted through writing, while at the same time using it to impose his law. He wanted to stop the scholars having recourse to the ancient texts, by suppressing them or at least suppressing the most disturbing ones, namely The Book of Odes, The Documents, as well as The Sayings of the Hundred Schools. Lī Sì was therefore aware that writing was a powerful tool of transmission, promoting critical reflection. But he also recognized it as an instrument for training those who would be able to serve the government. This is why, despite his radical laws, he would not prohibit

16 In the postface of the Shuòwén (SWJZZ 15A 20b) Xū Shèn criticises mediocre scholars who pretend that the Cāng Jié piān was the work of an ancient emperor revealing magical powers, basing themselves on the sentence 幼子承诏 as meaning "The young son receives the imperial decree" (zhào being understood as gào 訓).
17 It is not easy to understand this last part since the last four characters are missing.
18 Shìjì 6: 254 and 87: 2546.
19 In Lī Sì’s biography (Shìjì 87: 2546), Simā Qiān adds a critical commentary on the confiscation of these texts: 始皇可其議，收去詩書百家之語以愚百姓，使天下無以古非今 "The First Emperor approved this proposal and accordingly confiscated and did away with the Odes, the Documents, and the Sayings of the Hundred Schools in order to make the common people ignorant and ensure that no-one in the empire used the past to criticize the present."
20 As Simā Qiān 司馬遷 says (Shìjì 6:255), the official histories other than those of the Qín were also suppressed.
writing since it was clearly an indispensable practice of his period and his policies,\(^{21}\) and he encouraged those who wanted to study the law to take state functionaries as their masters, trained, at least in principle, in the graphic norm of the Qin\(^ {22}\) (already used by the State of Qin before 221 B.C.).\(^ {23}\)

A little less than a century later, in the Huainanzi 淮南子 (139 B.C.), Cāng Jié was still considered the inventor of writing, but his invention had created some curious phenomena:

昔者蒼頔作書而天雨粟，鬼夜哭：伯益作井而龍登玄雲，神棲崑崙：能愈多而德愈薄矣。

In ancient times, when Cāng Jié invented writing, Heaven rained down millet and ghosts wailed at night; when Bóyì invented wells, dragons climbed up to the dark clouds and demons made their home in Kūnlún. The more that knowledge increased, the less concern was shown for inner virtue.\(^ {24}\)

Strangely, it was not men themselves who were worried about the invention of writing but the ghosts. The relationship between the ghosts and writing is particularly interesting. The fact that they were disturbed by the invention of writing, just as the dragons (who lived in the valleys) were troubled by the digging of wells, suggests that writing had a certain power over them or at least intruded on their territory. Different interpretations of these phenomena have been proposed.\(^ {25}\)

\(^{21}\) The civil and judicial administration of the Qin is known for its high level of development and for having therefore led to a much more rapid graphic style lìshū 跡書 (SWJZZ 15A 10b). As Jacques Gernet has noted: "Dans l’administration, c’est par le recours à l’écrit (rapports de gestion, inventaires, états quotidiens...), aux calculs, aux modes de preuves objectifs (seaux, insigne, etc.) que doit être assurée la stricte exécution des ordres." (Le monde chinois 1972:88).

\(^{22}\) Nevertheless, as noted by Bān Gù (Hàoshū:1721) and Xū Shēn (SWJZZ 15A 13b), the original text of Lǐ Sī presented many ancient graphs, which would mean that Lǐ Sī’s reform would not have been so radical as had been claimed.

\(^{23}\) This policy certainly encouraged the teaching of the Chinese writing. The fact that several fragments of the Cāng Jié pían have been found in both the north-west (near Dùnhuáng and western Inner Mongolia (cf. Fukuda Tetsuyuki 1993) as well as in the south of China (in a tomb in the Shānxi province, dating from 165 B.C. (see Hù Píngshēng and Hán Ziqìáng 1983, and also Fukuda Tetsuyuki 1989) confirms the very widespread use of this text throughout the whole territory of China, at least during the Hán period.

\(^{24}\) Zhāng Shuāngdī 張雙棣 Huainanzi jìoshì 1997, ch. 8 Bēn jīng xùn 本經訓:828.

\(^{25}\) As we will see later (see infra:147), Wáng Chōng denies, for example, the causal relationship (Lùnhēng jìoshì 19 Gān xù pían 恕虛篇:249-50), and suggests that it was perhaps the qi 氣, which, through its ability to imitate human forms and sounds, was able to make people believe in the wailing of ghosts (Lùnhēng jìoshì 65 Dìng guī pían 訂鬼篇:940-41). While Gāo Yǒu (in a commentary attributed to him, although some attribute it to Xū Shēn, cf. Acker 1954-63 note 1, see below) explained them in the following way: 蒼頔始視鳥
during the night because they "feared they would be impeached". But it is hard to see why the ghosts would be impeached by written documents and why this would not also affect men.

As Anna Seidel has emphasized, the representation of demons and the fact of calling them by their names were ways used long before the Hán dynasty to keep them at bay and would become a central concern in Taoism. The invention of writing could therefore have played an apotropaic role, equivalent to that of certain images used to ward off the demons. But even if, as Anna Seidel has pointed out, the list of gods or of demons found in the famous Hán Apocrypha texts, Chènwèi 劉維, must have made the demons howl, it is surely not simply because of writing them. I think it is rather the fact of naming them or reciting their names that first gave men power over them and helped keep the demons at a distance. In other words, these forms of defense against the demons were not strictly speaking the prerogative of writing. This is why I think we have to look for an explanation which is

26 See William Boltz's translation in the preceding note.
27 Anna Seidel (1983:320) (also discussed by Boltz, 1994:133) mentions the famous example of the Zuo3zhua4n 21 Xuān Gōng 3 (SSJZZ:1868b) with the nine tripods on which strange creatures were represented in order for the people to protect themselves from them.
closer to the particularities of writing. Writing is by its very nature permanent, as opposed to speech (which is effective in the immediate present), but writing is also capable of recalling what is no longer present, or of hiding what is present. These elements result in writing having a subtle relationship with the invisible world. One can ask if it is not through its interaction with the ancestors, the facts about whom and whose actions one can later read about, and with the descendants to whom, for instance, wishes can be transmitted, that writing would not encroach on the world of ghosts and would thereby confer on the world of the living a power over the world of the beyond.\textsuperscript{28}

In any case, we see here an original idea of the consequences of the invention of writing which differs from those proposed by previous authors and which is all the more interesting for betraying an approach that freely incorporates popular beliefs, to which we are so partial.

In another chapter (19 \textit{Xiù wù xùn}修務訓) of \textit{Huáinánzì}, \textit{Liu Ān} 劉安 (c. 179-122) refers to Cāng Jié but also to Shī Huáng. Cāng Jié remains the one who invented writing:

\begin{quote}
昔者，蒼顔作書，客成造曆，胡曹為衣，后稷耕稼， 僖狄作酒， ､仲為 車。此六人者，皆有神明之道，聖智之跡，故人作一事而遺後世，非能一人而獨兼有之。\textsuperscript{29}
\end{quote}

In ancient times, Cāng Jié invented writing, Róng Chéng created the calendar system; Hú Cáo made clothes, Hòujì ploughed and sowed seeds; Yì Dì invented alcohol, and Xízhòng constructed chariots.

Meanwhile Shī Huáng is described, a bit earlier in the text, as someone who was able to write as soon as he was born: 史皇産而能書.\textsuperscript{30} In contrast to the sentence of the \textit{Lūshì chuánqiu}, mentioned earlier (史皇作圖), here the character tú 圖 ‘charts’ was replaced by shū 書 ‘writing’, which, however, designates a completely different reality. Moreover, here it is not a question of invention but innate knowledge.\textsuperscript{31} This did not stop Gǎo Yòu in his commentary from identifying Shī Huáng with Cāng Jié and adding that he was called by this name (Scribe Huáng) because he knew how to write down

\begin{footnotes}
\item[28] If, on the other hand, ancestors or ghosts alone could use all sorts of (written) signs to communicate with the world of the living, the invention of writing would change the situation and make men intrude on their territory.
\item[31] Note that Shī Huáng is presented in this passage with other heroes either born in a marvellous way or possessing extraordinary features.
\end{footnotes}
texts. Since the names of Cāng Jié and Shī Huáng appear in the same chapter, it is possible that there were two traditions for explaining the invention of writing in this period: one presenting Shī Huáng as knowing how to write at birth; the other attributing the invention of writing to Cāng Jié – unless shū 'writing' is a mistake for huà 'drawing'.

Finally, a third mention of Cāng Jié in the Huáinánzī is just as interesting because it promotes the role of writing:

Writing makes government possible, but it goes beyond this pure administrative function since it allows people lacking talents to keep a memory of (recent) things and those who are talented to recall ancient events, present them and possibly inspire others. The Huáinánzī here elaborates an original idea about the different personal use of writing and widens our horizon of the conceptions of writing during this era.

We now need to mention the Shìběn 世本, a work that has unfortunately been lost since the Sòng dynasty, but which was said to contain 15 chapters and was used by Simā Qiān in the compilation of his Shìjì. Several authors mention it, for example the six we will consider here.

a) Jiā Gōngyán 賈公彥 (7th century) mentions it in his commentary on the Zhōuli3 Wa4ishi3 周禮外史: "The chapter on the inventions of the Shìběn says: Cāng Jié created writing".

b) In the first chapter of the Guāngyùn 廣韻 (1011 A.D.), one finds under the character shū 書 the following citation: "The Shìběn says: Jū Sòng and Cāng Jié invented writing"; and there is
almost the same passage under the character jù 湃: 世本云沮誦蒼頡作書.

c) In the 57th chapter of the Wénxuān 文選 (6th century), we find in the commentary of the Eulogy Sòng Xiào Xuán Guîfëi le3i 宋孝宣貴妃誄 the following line: 世本曰：史皇作圖 "The Shibēn says: Shì Huáng invented pictorial representation", with (2nd-3rd centuries) Sòng Zhōng’s explanations: 宋衷曰：史皇、黃帝臣也, 圖謂畫物象也 "Sòng Zhōng says: Shì Huáng was Huángdì’s minister; tú means to draw creatures and images".

d) According to Táng Lán (1979: 53), the Yìwén lèijù 藝文類聚 (625 A.D.) includes the following sentence from the Shibēn: "The Shibēn says: Shî Huáng invented 'charts' or 'pictorial representation', but I personally have not been able to locate this quotation.

e) Kŏng Yingdá 孔穎達 (574-648), in his commentary on the preface to the Shàngshu1 唐書 which was written by Kŏng Āngú 孔安國, considered that the idea of Căng Jié being the inventor of writing came from the chapter on "The inventions" Zuo4piān 作篇 of the Shibēn and he quotes: "According to the Shibēn, Shî Huáng invented 'charts' or 'pictorial representation' and Căng Jié invented writing".

f) Finally, in the 235th chapter of the Tàipíng yùlân 太平御覽 of the Sòng, one finds again the same citation as in the Wénxuān, with the same commentary by Sòng Zhōng: 世本曰：史皇作圖. 宋衷注：史皇、黃帝臣也，圖謂畫物象也. The Shibēn therefore presented Căng Jié as the inventor of writing, and Shî Huáng as the inventor of the tú 'charts' or 'pictorial representation' (and possibly of the huà 'drawings'), but clearly not of the shî 'writing'. Note that in the Guângyùn, another protagonist Jū Sòng 汲誦 is accredited with inventing writing with Căng Jié.42

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39 Shísa1njïng zhùshù, 1980:113b.
40 Tàipíng yùlân, 1960, vol 2:1114 (235, 4a).
41 It is probably the sentence 蒼頡作書 and not 蒼頡造文字 that was the original formulation in the Shibēn since the expression wénzì did not become common until the Shuo1wén jie3zì (Bottéro 2004:21).
42 Jū Sòng 汲誦 is also mentioned in the Fèngsùtōng 風俗通 (c. 200 A.D.) of Ying Shào 應劭. This text is quoted in the Hòu Hànshu1 後漢書 (9:379, see also note 3) in the following passage about Jū Jūn 汲君: "The Fèngsùtōng 風俗通 says: "Jū 汲 is a clan name. Jū Jūn was a descendant of the scribe Jū Sòng 汲誦 of the Yellow Emperor." Wèi Héng 衛恆 (3rd century) also quotes Jū Sòng in his Sītīshā shì 四體書勢: "Jū Sòng 汲誦 was a descendant of Jū Jūn 汲君. In the past, during Huángdì’s time, basic rules were established and things created. There were Jū Sòng and Căng Jié who first invented writing and (written) contracts to replace knotted ropes." In other words, Jū Sòng 汲誦 should not
Cāng Jié 蒸䩊, the scribe of Huángdì 黃帝, the Yellow Emperor

The association between Cāng Jié and 'the Yellow Emperor', Huángdì 黃帝 dates from the Hàn period. Wáng Chōng 王充 (27-97) refers several times (22 times) to Cāng Jié in his Lùnhéng. He first introduces him by way of secondary literary sources, certainly not studied by the scholars, but in which Cāng Jié had been described as a person possessing four eyes and consequently occupying the function of scribe for the Yellow Emperor. In chapters 15 and 49, Wáng Chōng returns to the idea that when Cāng Jié invented writing, he modeled the characters from reality. But when the written names assigned to legendary heroes such as jï ŋ fail to correspond to events depicting their birth, Wáng Chōng questions the legends surrounding the heroes rather than criticizing the characters used to name them:

失道之意，還反其字。蒼頡作書，與事相連。姜原履大人跡。跡者基也，
姓當為其下土，乃為女旁臣，非基跡之字，不合本事，疑非實也。
(Lùnhéng jiàoshì 15 Qí guài piān 奇怪篇;163)
With ideas that 'lose the way' we should return to the written words. When Cāng Jié invented writing, he related it to events. Jiāng Yuán walked on the giant's footprints. 'Footprint' refers to 'basis', the clan name therefore ought to be '其' with '土' below [that is jï 基]. But the character with the 'woman' component and yí '臣' [jï 基] is neither the character jï 'basis' nor jì 'footprint'; since it does not correspond with the original event, I suspect it is not the reality.

As other authors cited earlier, Wáng Chōng on four occasions associates Cāng Jié with Xīzhòng 奚仲, the inventor of the chariot (chapters 36, 46, 47)
State employees live inside the city walls, ride in chariots when going out, and cope with documents when sitting. Which king first built city walls? Which artisan first made chariots? Where was the place for first breeding horses? And who invented writing? It is difficult to know who first built city walls, and where horses were first bred, for it is too far in the past. It is easy to know, who invented chariots, and who invented writing, hence one will certainly reply: “Cāng Jié invented writing, and Xīzhòng invented the chariot.” But if one goes on to ask: “What inspired Cāng Jié to invent writing, and what incited Xīzhòng to invent the chariot?” one again does not know. These are what the civil officials should know, but do not know, and it is also the officials’ fault not to extend their own knowledge.

In other words Wáng Chōng considers that the invention of writing, like that of chariots, did not go back as far as the building of the city walls and the domestication of animals. The fact that he asks himself what could have triggered the invention of writing is particularly interesting. But he answers this question later, in chapter 55 Gàn lèi piān:

It is through the observation of bird’s footprints that Cāng Jié understood how to form writing, and it is through the observation of Fēi péng flowers that Xīzhòng understood how to make chariots. Heaven did not use bird’s footprints to command Cāng Jié, nor Fēi péng flowers to order Xīzhòng; it is Xīzhòng who was touched by Fēi péng flowers and it is Cāng Jié who was inspired by bird’s footprints.

In chapter 84, the author of the Lùnhéng indicates clearly that the role of writing is to record the facts:

The writing (invented by) Cāng Jié has been used by people to record events, the chariot (invented by) Xīzhòng has been used by people to transport themselves.

Wáng Chōng also repeats the story, already described in the Huáinánzǐ, of the raining of grain and of the ghosts wailing at night following the invention
of writing by Câng Jié (ch. 18, 19, 65). He uses this story to criticize the supposed causal relationships. The traditional explanation was that disorder appeared with the invention of writing. But the invention of writing by Câng Jié was not really different from the creation of the Charts and the Writings by Heaven and Earth, and these were considered as beneficial events. So there was a contradiction in thinking of the invention of writing as something negative. If it is true that grain had rained down and that the ghosts howled at night, it is certainly, for Wáng Chōng, a matter of chance that these events were co-incidental with the invention of writing. But it is also quite possible that it was the vital energies qi which, through their ability to imitate human forms and sounds, could have convinced men to believe that the ghosts had wailed at night.  

傅書言：倉頡作書，天雨粟，鬼夜哭。此言文章興而亂漸見，故其妖變，致天雨粟，鬼夜哭也。夫見天雨粟，鬼夜哭，實也。言其應倉頡作書，虛也。夫河出圖，洛出書，聖帝明王之瑞應也。圖書文章與倉頡所作字畫（書）何以異？天地為圖書，倉頡作文字，業與天地同，指異鬼神合，何非何惡，而致天雨粟，鬼夜哭之怪？使天地鬼神惡人有書，則其出圖書，非也。天不惡人有書，作書何非而致此怪？或時倉頡遇作書，天盡雨粟，鬼偶夜哭，而雨粟，鬼哭自有所為。世見應書而至，則謂作書生亂敗之象，應事而動也。（Lùnhéng jiàoshi 19 Gān xǔ piàn 感虛篇:249-250)  

The transmitted texts say that when Câng Jié invented writing, Heaven rained down grain, and ghosts wailed at night. This is to say that as soon as writings flourished, disorder began to gradually appear. Hence the evil prodigies, which caused Heaven to rain down grain and ghosts to wail at night. Now, that Heaven rained down grain and ghosts wailed at night, that is true enough. But to say that [such phenomena] came in reaction to Câng Jié's invention of writing, that is a falsehood. Now, the Yellow River produced the Charts, and the Luî River produced the Writings. These are auspicious signs that come in response to sage emperors and enlightened kings. How were the texts of the Charts and the Writings and the documents with the characters invented by Câng Jié any different? Heaven and Earth made the Charts and Writings; Câng Jié invented the characters. His deeds were the same as those of Heaven and Earth, which

48 論說之家著於書記者皆云 天雨粟者凶。書傳日蒼頡作書，天雨粟，鬼夜哭。此方凶惡之應合者，天何用成穀之道（Lùnhéng jiàoshi 18 Yì xǔ piàn 異虛篇:221）“Those among the experts in discourse who write in books all say: 'For Heaven to rain down grain is inauspicious'. The written traditions say: 'When Câng Jié invented writing, Heaven rained down grain, and the ghosts wailed at night.' As to this response, perfectly in accordance with an evil event, why would Heaven employ a method with ripened grain?”  

49 及倉頡作書，鬼夜哭。氣能象人聲而哭，則亦能象人形而見，則人以為鬼（Lùnhéng jiàoshi 65 Dìng gù piàn 訂鬼篇:940-41）“And when Câng Jié invented writing, the ghosts wailed at night. Since vital energies qi have the ability to imitate human sounds and cry, and also have the ability to imitate human shapes and become visible, people believed that it was the ghosts that had wailed at night.”
means that he was in accord with the spirits. What wrong, what evil was there, to cause evil prodigies such as the raining of grain and the howling of spirits? If the spirits of Heaven and Earth had not wanted humans to have writing, then it was wrong of them to produce the Charts and the Writings. And if Heaven did not mind that humans had writing, what evil was there in the invention of writing that would bring about such an evil prodigy? Perhaps, at that time, right when Cāng Jié invented writing, Heaven happened to rain down grain and the ghosts, by chance, wailed at night. But such phenomena have their own causes. People at that time, considering that they occurred in response to writing’s invention, then said that they were a sign of the chaos engendered by the invention of writing, that they were acts in response to events.

Wáng Chōng finally refers to the manual of characters that is called Cāng Jié and the books of ars minor, and tells us on which day Cāng Jié died:

Moreover, those who study the writings consider the bīng days taboo, and say: Cāng Jié died on a bīng day.

Drawing from secondary literary sources Wáng Chōng provides us with a great deal of information about Cāng Jié, even more extensive than the preceding authors. He enables us to get a clearer idea of the legend of Cāng Jié as it existed in the 1st century of our era and to understand how it had developed: Cāng Jié became the scribe of the Yellow Emperor; he had been inspired by the marks left behind by birds to invent writing; and he was assigned a specific day to commemorate his death. Finally, according to what some said, he even had four eyes. As for writing, this was seen as a means of recording events and remained tied to symbolizing reality.

A few years later, in the Shuòwén jièzì (100 A.D.), Cāng Jié was confirmed in his function of scribe of the Yellow Emperor, but Xū Shèn incorporated him in a well-defined chronological sequence. We learn that Páo Xiè first invented the trigrams; then that knotted ropes were used for governing, during the time of Shén Nóng; and that it was subsequent to this that Cāng Jié invented writing.

50 Lùnhéng jiàoshì 19 Bié tòng piān 別通篇:603: "The Cāng Jié chapter is a text for learning how to write, in which all the characters have been included."
51 As I will mention it below, this passage is taken from the Yìjīng Xící (Shíshānjīng zhùshù: 86b).
In ancient times when Páo Xi ruled over the world, looking up, he contemplated the images in the sky, and looking down, he observed the laws on the earth. He observed the markings on birds and beasts and their adaptation to their environment. Close to him, he was inspired by his own person; at a distance, he was inspired by all creatures. Then, he first created the Eight Trigrams to transmit the aspects of the Laws (of the Universe). Later, Shén Nóng used knotted ropes to govern and administer state affairs. Professional occupations proliferated, ornaments and artefacts began to develop. Căng Jié, the scribe of the Yellow Emperor, observing the traces left by the feet and paws of birds and beasts, understood that they could be differentiated by their distinctive principles. He invented writing and (written) contracts. Officials could be governed and products could be controlled. He probably derived this from the guài hexagram. "Guài: exhibit at the royal court" means that it is the written texts that transmit the teachings [of the ancients] and manifest education at the king's court. "It is the means by which benefits dispensed by the gentleman reach those below. When one acts according to virtue one observes what is forbidden."

Whereas the first paragraph is taken from the Yìjīng Xìcí, Xu Shèn has his own way of elaborating the story. In the Xìcí, it was Páo Xì or Fú Xì who invented knotted ropes to make nets for hunting and fishing and it was Shén Nóng who used them for governing. But it was the Sages of antiquity who replaced the knotted ropes with writing:

In ancient times when Páo Xi ruled over the world, looking up, he contemplated the images in the sky, and looking down, he observed the laws on the earth. He observed the markings on birds and beasts and their adaptation to their environment. Close to him, he was inspired by his own person, at a distance, he was inspired by all creatures. Then, he first created the Eight Trigrams to communicate with the powers of spiritual enlightenment and to imitate the nature of the myriad creatures. He invented knotted ropes to make nets for hunting and fishing. He probably derived this from the li hexagram. [...] In high antiquity, people used knotted ropes to govern. Later on Sages replaced them with writing and (written) contracts. Officials could be governed and the people could be controlled. He probably derived this from the guài hexagram.

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53 Ibid. In the Yìjīng the text is slightly different: 君子以施祿及下。居德則忌。
54 Yìjīng Xìcí B, SSJZS:86b.
55 Yìjīng Xìcí B, SSJZS:87b.
The text of the *Xìcí* does not specify which of the Sages of antiquity had replaced the knotted ropes with writing, but Xū Shèn declares that it was Cāng Jié, the scribe of Huángdì, who had invented them. Besides, Xū Shèn proceeded to explain how Cāng Jié first had the idea of writing: whereas Fú Xi had been inspired by the markings on beasts’ and birds’ bodies to create the eight trigrams, Cāng Jié himself was inspired by the traces they left on the ground. In other words, in his postface, Xū Shèn shows that Cāng Jié modeled his ideas on Fú Xi to create writing and that, as with the trigrams and knotted ropes, writing was used for governing.

As for all the inventions enumerated in the *Xìcí*, writing was inspired by a hexagram: *guài*. Xū Shèn adheres to the idea that the *Changes* were at the origin of all the inventions that are fundamental for the culture. He falls under the tradition of the *Xìcí*, but also elaborates on the origin of writing in his own way, since too little had been said about it. Just as stated in the *Huáinánzì*, the *Yìjìng Xìcí* (*SSJZS*:87b), or in the *Hànshū* (30:1720), Xū Shèn asserts that writing made administration possible, but he insists on the fact that the texts allow the propagation of the teachings of the ancients, the enlightenment of the court and the cultivation of moral integrity – What absolute faith in the transmitted texts!

His originality, compared to earlier authors, is that he advances the idea of writing as trace: traces left by birds, as Wáng Chōng had already said, but also and above all, traces of the past and traces for future generations:

蓋文字者經藝之本。王政之始。前世所以傳後，後人所以識古。

It would appear that written characters are the foundation of the Classics and the Arts, and the beginning of the royal Government. It is the means by which old generations transmit to younger generations and younger generations know the old generations.

Finally, and most significantly, the author of *Shuòwén* goes much further
and describes the historical process of the creation of written words:

When Cāng Jié first invented writing, it is presumably because he copied the forms according to their resemblances that they were called wén ‘patterns’. Then forms and pronunciations were added to each other, so they were called zì ‘written words’. (SWJZZ 15A 2a)

In this very significant passage that is usually poorly interpreted, Xu Shēn explains that there were initially simple graphic representations, before language could be recorded. In other words, sketches of reality preceded the writing of words to describe this reality. And it was by associating a word in the spoken language to each of these images that writing came to record the language.

Conclusion

Cāng Jié was definitively proclaimed as the inventor of writing by the disciples of Xúnzī, and soon became the scribe of the Yellow Emperor, inspired by the traces left by birds, as we have learned from Wáng Chōng and Xu Shēn. We could pursue the search for information about Cāng Jié through the subsequent centuries, but we would not learn much from this. We would obviously see that there were conflicting views on the dates to assign to Cāng Jié: whether he lived before or after Fú Xì. But Xu Shēn's postface already allows us to understand this, since he imposed a strict chronology and suggested that Cāng Jié used Fú Xì as his model for inventing writing. We would also see in later texts that there were certainly different schools attributing the invention of writing to different persons: Cāng Jié, Shī Huáng, Jū Sòng. Here again we can infer this from the fact that these names appeared before Xu Shēn, but Xu Shēn only retained one of them: Cāng Jié. Moreover the author of the Shuòwén jiézì also provides us with a tangible way of creating characters: observing nature and the indices it reveals to those who know how to see them.

According to the documents which we have access to, the question of the

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61 This is what Kōng Yingdá writes in his commentary to the preface to the Shànghshù, SSJZS: 113b. Generally, as the centuries advanced, Cāng Jié was considered to have lived at an increasingly early period, receding further into time immemorial. Indeed, according to Cài Yōng 蔡邕 (132-192) or Cáo Zhì 曹植 (192-232), Cāng Jié was a king in ancient times, and according to Zhāng Yī 張熹 (3rd century), he went back 276,000 years. Note however that Shēn Dào 慎到 (350-275?) had already considered him as predating Páo Xì 蒲鷗之前.
origin of writing did not go further back than the 3rd century before our era. And this is perhaps not by chance. Firstly because a more personal practice of the act of writing was needed to understand its importance; but secondly, because any reflection on writing would have been inconceivable without the need to also question its role and place in society and government. More than any others, the 'legalist' Hán Fēi and Lǐ Sì seem to have satisfied these conditions and to have understood the importance of writing: the former quite likely for physical reasons (he was a stutterer), the latter for political reasons (the need to control all the conquered territories). But it is in the Huànnánzǐ that the role of writing seems for the first time to have been explicitly defined in terms of personal use as well as administrative usefulness. The idea that writing allows the functioning of the government was then developed by Xū Shēn who insisted on the importance of the texts and the teachings their convey for moral integrity. With the Hàn dynasty writing is definitively at the heart of government.

The different versions of the Cāng Jié legend up until the Hàn dynasty also suggest the richness of approaches and interpretations which prevailed before they became crystallised in the Shuòwén. They evoke, vaguely and from afar, the different versions of the transmitted texts that can be found, here and there, in the tombs before the Hàn. They give us a glimpse into how ideas circulated, developed, and varied depending on who was one's master and which texts one read, with a certain "freedom of expression" that contributed to their burgeoning, and, above all, avoided them becoming just carbon copies of each other.

In the end, we have been able to see how the narrative of Cāng Jié's legend was constructed and elaborated over time through the authors who quoted the legend, each of them developing the theme according to his own convictions, or attempting to make a particular point. Xū Shēn clearly sifted through these different versions and selected the elements which he intended to keep, performing a sort of rationalization. By re-organizing the legend of Cāng Jié to adapt it to the context of the other legends adopted by the Hàn (Fú Xì, Shēn Nóng, Huánɡdì), but also to make it more coherent and plausible, Xū Shēn in a way played an equivalent role to that of Liú Xiànɡ (79 B.C. - 8 B.C.) and Liú Xīn (46 B.C. - 23 A.D.) with respect to the ancient texts. In this way, he contributed to establishing and imposing the

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62 Subsequently, the discovery of texts in ancient characters would generate major questions on the history and evolution of writing, and lead to the theory of the liúshū 六書 taken up again by Xū Shēn in the Shuòwén.

63 In fact, as Jean Levi shows marvelously from anecdotes taken from the Hánfēizǐ (such as that of the man who inadvertently records an order he gave to his servants in the letter he is writing to the court of Yān, or that of the man from Zhènɡ who returned home to look for the measure of his foot to buy shoes, etc.) (1995:45 et seq.), Hán Fēi falls in the same lineage as Lào Zī and "criticises the bookish practice and the absurdities to which it leads".
legend, once and for all.\footnote{This legend was still alive in 1928, when Maspero (1971:169) wrote in "Mythologie de la Chine moderne": "Les conteurs publics ont pour patron Câng Jié, l'inventeur légendaire de l'écriture".}

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