A Study of the Pottery Inscription “Wen Yi”

Feng Shi*

Key words: Bronze Age–China   Taosi Site (Xiangfen County, Shanxi)   Flasks   Scripts

Since the publishing, the red ink-written inscription (Figure 1; Li 2001) on pottery flask unearthed from Pit H4303 at Taosi Site, Xiangfen County, Shanxi Province attracted much attention of academic field. This flask was dated as the 20th century BCE, which was in the chronological scope of the Xia Dynasty. Because of the studies to the worshipping of God of Land of the Xia Dynasty and the relevant history facts (Feng 2002a), we know that this has close relationship with Xia Culture. It is well known that the discovery of oracle bone script was essential for the identification of the natures of Yinxu Culture; then, that whether the Taosi scripts have the same significance to the nature of Taosi Culture is a question to which we are eager to get the answers.

The red ink-written inscription of Taosi Culture belonged to the same writing system with the oracle bone script of the Shang Dynasty, therefore they could also be seen as the prototype of Chinese characters (Feng 2002b); for this reason, we can decode the Taosi inscription with the assistance of oracle bone scripts. As for the two characters in this inscription, the first is identified as “Wen” without disagreement among the researchers, but the deciphering of the second character has many contradicting results: for example, some scholars decipher it as “Yang” (Luo 2001), some scholars explained it as “Yao” (He 2007). However, the form of Yang in the Shang and Zhou inscriptions did not match the form of this character. On the other hand, the composition of Yao was that one or two “Tu” (Earth) were set on top and a “Ren” (Human being) was set below them (Figure 3). No matter in oracle bone scripts or in bronze inscriptions, the Tu “was all in the shape of “ or “, like tumulus piled up out of the horizon, because of which the “tumulus” could by no means separate from the “horizon”.

Therefore, the upper part of the second

* The Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing, 100710
character was absolutely not “Tu” and certainly the whole character could not be “Yao” at all.

In my opinion, the second character of the Taosi pottery inscription should be “Yi”. In the ancient scripts, Yi was combined by “宀” (Guo, ideographic indicator of an enclosing border or an enclosed scope) and “亻” (Ren, Human being), usually written like “亻”; and the prototype of this character was in a coarse shape. Hereby I select some cases from the bronze inscriptions of the Shang Dynasty (Figure 4).

All of them were composed of “宀” and “亻”, but of the ones of the two Yi Jue-cups, the heads of the “亻” part had been simplified from an imitation of human head into a dash, especially the first one (Figure 4:1, No. 7589 of Yin Zhou Jinwen Jicheng ᐯ_AT้างsubstring), which had almost identical shape and composition with the second character of Taosi pottery inscription, what slightly different was that the dash (head) of the “亻” part of Taosi pottery inscription was separated from the body because of the writing strokes. Both of the characters on the Jue-cups were identified as “Yi” in Jinwen Bian (Dictionary of Bronze Inscription, by Rong Geng), which are correct. Based on these evidences, the two characters of Taosi pottery inscription can be deciphered as “Wen Yi”.

The name “Wen Yi” has been seen in the oracle bone inscriptions of the Shang Dynasty (Figure 5). The divination words were:

Figure 4. The Character “Yi (亻)” in Bronze Inscriptions of the Shang Dynasty

Figure 5. The Name “Wen Yi (文衣)” in Oracle Bones and Shells
1. From No. 33243 of Jiaguwen Heji ᐯsubstring 2. From No. 33242 of Jiaguwen Heji ᐯsubstring

Wen Yi should be the name of a city referring to the capital of the Xia Dynasty. Historic literatures have exact records that the capitals of the Xia, Shang and Zhou Dynasties were all called “Yi”; in Chapters Tang Shi (the Speech of Tang) and Duo Fang (the Numerous Regions) of Shangshu (Book of Documents) and Yi Yin’s announcement quoted by the Chapter Zi Yi (the Black Robes) of Liji (Book of Rites), the capital of the Xia Dynasty was all mentioned as Xia Yi or Xi Yi Xia: in Chapters Mu Shi (King Wu’s Speech at Mu) and Duo Shi.
A Study of the Pottery Inscription “Wen Yi”

The Three Dynasties were called Yi; under the Yin it was called Shang Yi; and under the Western Zhou Dynasty was called Jingshi. English translated by Tjan.

Clearly, if the capital system in early Western Zhou Dynasty. When King Wen set his capital at Feng, his dynasty had a new capital built by King Pangeng of the Shang Dynasty. The title “Wen Xia” ought to be related to the fact that Xia was the descendant of Yu the Great. The Qi State enfeoffed by the Shang and Zhou Dynasties was all because it was treated as the successor of Yu the Great. The inscription of Shuyi Bell cast in the Spring-and-Autumn Period also mentioned that the Shang annexed the Xia Dynasty and Chu. Father Ding of Wen Xia, which meant that Yu, who was the descendant of the clan of the Xia Dynasty’s monarch, and this surname is given after the title of the dynasty. Then “Wen Xia” would be the name of a clan who was the descendant of the Xia Dynasty and named themselves after the dynasty, and revealed that the Xia Dynasty was also called Wen Xia in the early ages.

Sometimes the Xia Dynasty did have a prefix Wen and was called Wen Xia, which might be derived from an archaic system or custom; however, this title can be seen in the bronze inscriptions of the Shang Dynasty, such as:

The Wen Xia Fu Ding -vessel of the Shang Dynasty had inscription saying Wen Xia Fu Ding -jar of the Shang Dynasty also had the same inscription on both the body and the lid; another Wen Xia Fu Ding You -jar of the Shang Dynasty also had the same inscription on both the body and the lid (No. 5155 of ).

The original form of the character “Xia” was written as “臝” composed of “日” (the sun) and “戈” (the head)” (Tang 1999). This character was also seen in the oracle bone inscriptions as the name of a clan. It is noted in Yuanhe Xing Zuan (Yuanhe Compilation of Surnames) that “ (the surname) Xia is the descendant of the clan of the Xia Dynasty’s monarch, and this surname is given after the title of the dynasty.”

It is seen in historic literature that the name of Yu the Great was Wenming (see Chapters Wu Di De [the Virtue of the Five Emperors] and Dixi [the Genealogy of the Emperors]) of Da Dai Liji (Book of Rites by Elder Dai). The extant versions of Liji (Book of Rites) were compiled by the two Dais in the Middle Western Han Dynasty, but the materials they referred to were the old versions written with the extinct scripts of the Warring-States Period, and the study summaries of the Confucian disciples have been found in the bamboo slips of the Warring-States Period unearthed recently, which proved that this thought and story have been formed in the pre-Qin period. Da Dai Liji announced that it was Confucius who mentioned Yu the Great’s name as Wenming; this is not groundless. Sima
Qian also wrote in *Xia Benji* (Basic Annals of Xia) that Xia’s Yu, his name was Wenming”, directly following Confucian suggestion. In his *Jingdian Shiwen* (Annotation of Classics), Lu Deming of the Tang Dynasty also pointed out that Yu the Great’s name was Wenming was the common knowledge of the past Confucian scholars. The Chapter *Dayu Mo* (the Counsels of Yu the Great) in the pseudo old text of *Shangshu* said “文王之聖, 視若天也; 智若湯也; 勇若武也; 仁若文也” (On examining into antiquity, we find that Yu the Great was called Wenming. Having arranged and divided the Empire, all to the seas, in reverent response to the inquiries of the former emperor – English translated by James Legge)”; the commentary attributed to Kong Anguo glossed the “Wenming” in this sentence as’ 文’ (his accomplished virtue and the lessons of his teaching were spread abroad to the four seas – English translation by James Legge)” that was the much later interpretation to Yu’s name. Obviously, Wenming as Yu’s name adequately reflected the virtue-teaching thoughts of the Xia people.

The Wen in Taosi pottery inscription has strong relation to Wenming as Yu’s name. Of course, this name might be a summery made by Yu’s descendants for Xia’s viewpoint of virtue-teaching. It is noted in Chapter *Biaoji* (the Record on Example) of *Liji* (Book of Rites) that “Under the Xia Dynasty it was the way to give honor to the nature conferred on men; they served the manes of the departed, and respected Spiritual Beings, keeping them at a distance, while they brought the people near, and made them loyal; ......under the Yin Dynasty, they honored Spiritual Beings, and led the people on to serve them; they put first the service of their manes, and last the usages of ceremony...... (his accomplished virtue and the lessons of his teaching were spread abroad to the four seas – English translated by James Legge)”; it also mentioned that the Xia kept the spiritual beings at a distance while brought the people near – paid more attention to the people than to the deities, and this is also the original meaning of Wenming 伯 . The prototype of Wen in Chinese characters was written in the shape of 伯, just like a heart in a house, correctly reflecting the Xia people’s primitive thought of virtue and humanities. It was mentioned in *Zhouyu Xia* (Discourses of Zhou, Part III) of *Guoyu* (Discourses on the States) that’ Wen zhi Gong ye 伯 伯 (courtesy, one of the virtues of Wen – Humanities)”. Wei Zhao , a historian in the Three-Kingdoms Period, interpreted Wen 伯 as “De zhi Zongming ye 伯 伯 (the general term of all virtues)”. Liu Xiang also explained in Chapter *Xiwen* (Cultivating the Wen) of his *Shuoyuan* (Garden of Anecdotes) that “Wen, De zhi Zhi ye 伯, 伯 伯 (Wen is the ultimate attainment of virtues)”. In the *Shifa* (Rules of Posthumous Naming) of *Yi Zhoushu* (?), the monarchs who could be given Wen 伯 as posthumous name should be“ 伯 伯 (with profound morals and virtues)”. Moreover, both the inscription of *Bingong Xu* 禮-vessel and the Chapter *Wu Di De* (lit. Humanity Proclamation) of *Da Dai Liji* (Discourses of Zhou) recorded the story about Yu established the humanity rules and paid attention to moral education, which was the origin of the virtue-teaching of the Xia people; all of the evidences from early antiquity proved that it was the traditional viewpoint that Yu strongly emphasized the Wen-virtue and morality, therefore this can be authentic history. Then, the historic fact was that because Yu the Great established and proclaimed the virtue-teaching system, his descendants named him as Wenming 伯 (lit. Humanity Proclamation) and entitled the Xia Dynasty as Wen Xia 伯 伯 . Ruled by this idea, the capital of the Xia Dynasty could be named with the most symbolic character in its ancestor’s or dynasty’s names, which was Wen, and called as Wen Yi 伯 , just as because the Shang people was worshipping the spiritual beings and ignoring the human rules, the capitals of the Shang Dynasty was named Tian Yi 伯 (City of Heaven). Therefore, the Taosi pottery inscription Wen Yi was actually meaning “the Capital of Xia”.

In the Shang Dynasty, the old Xia capital was still called’ Wen Yi”; the old Xia capital was also called as “Xi Yi” (lit. The West City of Xia)” in historic literature, and the name’ Xi Yi 伯 (lit. The West City)” was also seen in the Shang oracle bone inscriptions.
same place, which was the old capital of the Xia Dynasty; sometimes the Shang people called it “Xi Yi”, while sometimes also called it by the old name “Wen Yi”.

According to the rules of the Three Dynasties, the concepts of Yi and Guo were strictly distinguished; the original form of the character Yi was composed of an enclosed area on top and a kneeling human figure at bottom, therefore the original meaning of Yi was “settlement inhabited by human beings”. On the other hand, the pictogram Guo was written as “ GUO”, showing a wall-enclosed city with gate towers on all sides. Their contrast tells us that the difference of Yi and Guo was that Guo had walls surrounding it and Yi was dwelling area without enclosing walls. In oracle bone inscriptions, we can see different divinations about “Zuo Yi” and “Zuo Guo” as component of Yi was actually the pictogram of trenches or just imaginary border surrounding the settlement. Historic literature also had proofs for this suggestion. In short, that the Yi was settlement without enclosing walls was general rule of the Three Dynasties, which implies that Wen Yi, the capital of the Xia Dynasty, was also this type of settlement.

Apart from the different building rules, what more important is that all of the central settlements, or capitals of the dynasties where the rulers inhabited, of the Three Dynasties were built as the form of Yi. As the center of the realm, the capital Yi had symbol of the core or center in spatial structure: this viewpoint was deeply rooted in the people of the Three Dynasties, and reflected the unique political system of this period. The paleographic and historical philological researches showed that the political center of the Shang Dynasty was “Da Yi Shang”, and the territory beyond Da Yi Shang was divided into Guo (states) and enfeoffed to the royal kindred or other elite feudal lords. Therefore, the Shang Dynasty was a political entity consisting of the Nei Fu (Inner Domain), which was Da Yi Shang, and the Wai Fu (Outer Domain), which were the states (fiefs) enfeoffed to the royal kindred or other nobles. In this sense, Yi was used to call the capital vicinity and Guo was used to call the enfeoffed states in the outer domain. Da Yi Shang, which was called “Shang Yi” in Jiu Gao (Announcement about Drunkenness), was located at Yinxu, but the territory occupied by the states surrounding it was much larger. According to the feudal rules, the Yi inhabited by the king was guarded by the feudal lords, therefore the capital Yi was not only the residence of the royal family but also the symbol of the dynasty. This situation showed that the idea of “ruling the realm by settling down in the middle” was inherent to the rulers of the Three Dynasties, and the position of Yi as the core of the states was reflected clearly not only by the structure of the character Guo (state) but also by the political view and realities. Walls were built for defense; the royal capital, which was screened by the enfeoffed states, did not need to build wall to guard against attacks. It was noted in the Fourth Year of Duke Ding (of the Lu State of Zuo Zhuan that” Ping Wang Wei (Screen the Throne)” and “Ping Zhen Wei (Screen Our Throne)” are usually seen in bronze inscriptions of the Western Zhou Dynasty; both reflected the fundamental reason why the royal capitals were built as Yi without walls. Of course, the Wen Yi in Taosi pottery inscription should refer to the capital of the Xia Dynasty, which was the settlement inhabited by the Xia royal family.

At present, the scholars in relevant disciplines have the agreement that the remains of Taosi Culture could be dated into the early, middle and later phases. As the C14 dating data, the early phase of Taosi Culture was in the 24–22 centuries BCE, the middle phase was in the 22–21 centuries BCE and the later phase, 21–20 centuries BCE. The city walls found at Taosi Site belonged to the early and middle phases and the pottery inscription “Wen Yi” belonged to the later phase. The curling dragon design found in the relics of the early and middle phases showed the cultural connotation of Yu the Great; clearly, the remains of She (shrine for God of Land) of the early phase of Taosi Culture should belong to the Xia Culture of Yu the Great. Moreover, the
relationship between the city wall remains of the early and middle phases of Taosi Culture and Wen Yi actually embodied the evolution from Yangcheng, the capital of Yu the Great, to Wen Yi, the capital of the Xia Dynasty.

According to historic literatures, Yangcheng 卯卯, the capital of Yu the Great, was located at Xiaxu (Xia Ruins) in the south of present-day Shanxi Province (Ting 1935). Yangcheng has the term “Cheng 卯” in its name, from which we know that it had been enclosed by walls. This means that either by nature or by location, the wall-enclosed settlement of the early and middle phases of Taosi Culture closely matched Yangcheng seen in historic literatures. Therefore, we can infer that the walled city in the early and middle phases of Taosi Culture was Yangcheng, the capital of Yu the Great.

But to the later phase of Taosi Culture, the walls built in the early and middle phases were all superimposed or intruded by strata, pit or other remains, which meant that in this phase, the city wall had been abandoned (Shanxi Xiangfen 2005). The pottery inscription 德 Wen Yi” emerged at this time, however, just implied that the Xia people’s abandoning of Yangcheng was also their construction of Xia capital – Wen Yi, and proved that the so-called Wen Yi was a city (or settlement) without walls enclosed. The new text Zhushu Jinian 卯卯卯卯 (Bamboo Annals) noted that Qi 卯, the king of the Xia Dynasty, was enthroned in Xia Yi 卯卯 and attributed Xia Yi and Yangcheng as the same place, which might be historic fact. Yangcheng, as reflected by the term Cheng 卯 in its name, was a wall-enclosed city; Xia Yi, also as reflected by the term Yi 卯 in its name, was a settlement without walls enclosed. Obviously, the evolutions from Yu the Great to Qi, and from Yangcheng in the early phase of Taosi Culture to Wen Yi built in the later phase of Taosi Culture based on the site of Yangcheng, closely tallied with the vicissitude of Taosi Culture and the social system reforms revealed by archaeology.

The great social reforms shown by the evolution from Yangcheng Age in the early and middle phases to Wen Yi Age in the later phase of Taosi Culture, as displayed by results of archaeological work, occurred in the later phase of Taosi Culture. In other words, the constructing of Wen Yi in this phase was not only the abandoning of old Yangcheng, but also, and more important, the changing of political system, which was the abolishing of the abdication system and the establishing of the hereditary system, and the founding of the first hereditary dynasty in the history of China.

The change from abdication system to hereditary system was completed by Qi with violence. As the historic literature, when Yu the Great set his capital in Yangcheng, he chose Gaoyao 卯卯 and Yi 卯 as successors at different times, and still planned to practice abdication; but Qi destroyed the abdication system with revolutionary means and formally established the Xia Dynasty with hereditary throne. The large amount of traces of violence found in the remains of the later phase of Taosi Culture perhaps confirmed this historical event.

Some scholars have concluded the violence traces found in the later phase of Taosi Culture into six aspects: flatting city walls, demolishing palaces, slaughtering able-bodied men, raping women, destroying ancestral temples and looting mausoleums (Wang 2007). Clearly, these violence phenomena ran counter to the zeitgeist of the Yao-Shun Age in abdication stage and showed the turning point of political system at the time of which Qi seized the royal power with violence and changed the abdication system into hereditary system.

First, the historical interpretation to the flatting city walls might be that Qi ruined the ready Yangcheng and built Xia Yi (Wen Yi) for the founding of the Xia Dynasty. Yi was a ruler whose power was abdicated, therefore his capital city, Yangcheng, naturally could not be used as the symbol of the new dynasty; accordingly, his palaces could not be kept for the new hereditary rulers either. Therefore, Qi redesigned Yangcheng as Wen Yi and in fact initiated the new rules for capital designing in the Three Dynasties period.

Second, from the rubbish ditch HG8 of the later phase of Taosi Culture discovered in IT6026, not only large amount of half-processed stone flakes were unearthed, but five layers of human skulls, more than 30 in total, and human bones belonging to at least 40–50 individuals were found. The human bones had clear dismembering traces, and many of the skulls had hammering and picking traces; of these skulls, six were chopped-off complete or incomplete mask-shaped facial skeletons. Physical tests showed that most of these skulls and bones were that of adolescent or adult men. This slaughtering to strong male people might be the reflection of Qi’s forces’ massacre to Yi’s forces, which was also noted in historic literature as Qi murdered Yi and enthroned himself.

Third, in the ash pit IT5126H68 卯卯, an intact female
skeleton was found; her neck was broken and an ox horn was plugged in her vagina. Vagina is reproductive organ, so to plug the reproductive organ would be a penalty as the castration in later periods, which was a punishment with meaning of letting the punished people heirless. To be heirless meant the end of ancestor worshipping ceremonies (done by the descendants, therefore this ceremony represents the family continuity). The inscription of the Shu Yi Bell of the Spring-and-Autumn Period mentioned that Tang subdued the Xia Dynasty and discontinued the ancestor worshipping ceremonies. In this sense, destroying ancestral temples dued dynasty. Qi, for founding a new hereditary dynasty, worshipping ceremonies (i.e. making heirless) to a sub-dynasty. Qi, for founding a new hereditary dynasty, annihilated its army and discontinued its ancestor worshipping ceremonies: both of these inscriptions emphasized the symbolic significance of discontinuing ancestor worshipping ceremonies (done by the descendants, therefore this ceremony represents the family continuity). The inscriptions emphasized that the Zhou Dynasty subdued the Shang Dynasty, annihilated its army and discontinued its ancestor worshipping ceremonies; this implied that the political center of the Xia Dynasty was not in Wen Yi. Gui Cang attributed the Ji Du to Jinxu, whose location just matched the Nanshi – Fangcheng Site crossing Quwo Counties of Shanxi Province (Shanxi Yicheng 1996). Perhaps the so-called Ji Du, to which Qi went back, was in the present-day Yicheng; because the shapes of Ji and Yi are similar, a wrong transcription might have occurred in ancient time. The event that Qi moved to Ji Du also met the archaeological discovery that Taosi Site as a capital was replaced by Nanshi-Fangcheng Site in the later phase of Taosi Culture.

In conclusion, the Taosi pottery inscription should be interpreted as Wen Yi, which meant the Xia capital. Wen Yi was named after the name of Yu the Great and was used earlier than Xia Yi. The construction idea of Yi, which was not supposed to be enclosed by walls, was different from that of Cheng. As the center of the hereditary realm, the rules of designing Yi were created by Qi, the King of Xia, and became the general tradition of the Three Dynasties. Yu the Great set his capital at Yangcheng; Qi redesigned Yangcheng into Xia Yi, this epoch-making historic event was clearly reflected by the different features of the early, middle and later phases of Taosi Culture. This evolution symbolized the formal founding of the first hereditary dynasty in the history of China at the later phase of Taosi Culture, which was in the 21st century BCE, matching the era of the Xia Dynasty believed by the traditional historians.

**References**


Note: the original paper, published in *Kaogu Xuebao* (Acta Archaeologica Sinica) 2008. 3: 273–90 with five illustrations, was written by Feng Shi. The abridged version is prepared by the author and translated into English by Ding Xiaolei .