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Three Ancient Words for Bear

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Three Ancient Words for Bear

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Foreword

Victor H. Mair

Xióng 熊 (“bear”) was the totem and royal clan name of the ancient south central state of Chu (704–223 BC). Because Chu was an important regional culture with extra-Sinitic linkages during the first millennium BC, and because of certain orthographic and phonological problems concerning how to write and reconstruct the sound of 熊 and its congeners, I suggested to Diana Shuheng Zhang that she might write a brief paper on this topic, and she prepared it within a day or two. The result is this issue of *Sino-Platonic Papers*.

Since there have been many requests for an early publication of this material, I have dispensed with certain formalities and usages (e.g., transcriptions and translations of cited Chinese passages, full bibliographical entries, and so forth) for this issue.

This paper is really not about morphology or proto-etyma; rather it is a compilation of succinct solutions to some problems that connect the overlooked dots across natural history, paleography, sound changes and regionalism, and literary history.

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Bear with me regarding the length and detail of this essay, but the “bear” issue is far more exciting than I had originally expected! I will approach it by examining five aspects, divided into a total of five sections, under each of which there are subsections. Each section provides resources that build support for the next sections. The first two sections are mainly listings of data and materials to serve the latter three sections.*

This answer is a little bit long as it is a slightly complicated issue, but I hope that the whole logical thread makes sense. I explained some of the changes to Prof. Don Ringe (not all, for I kept working after talking with him), and he said that although he knew none of the “facts,” every step of deduction sounds reasonable in the linguistic sense.

I. HISTORICAL AND LITERARY EVIDENCE IN CHINESE CLASSICS

1-A.

There are three attested names for bears in Pre-Qin times: 熊能羆.

1-B. ATTESTATIONS: 熊

Book of Odes:

- 吉夢維何？維熊維羆，維虺維蛇。——小雅·斯干 Ode 189

* The author wishes to convey her gratitude to her colleague Mr. John Carlyle for his discussion with her of the linguistic aspects of this paper.

- 舟人之子，熊羆是裘。——大雅·大東 Ode 203
- 川澤訏訏，魴鱖甫甫，麀鹿嘒嘒，有熊有羆，有貓有虎。——大雅·韓奕 Ode 261

Book of Documents:

- “益拜稽首，讓于朱虎、熊羆。”——舜典
- “華陽、黑水惟梁州。……厥貢璆鐵銀鏤、罍磬、熊羆、狐狸、織皮。”——禹貢
- “西傾、朱圉、鳥鼠至于太華；熊耳、外方、桐柏至于陪尾。”——禹貢
- “導洛自熊耳，東北，會于澗、瀍；又東，會于伊，又東北，入于河。”——禹貢
- “尚桓桓如虎、如貔、如熊、如羆，于商郊弗迓克奔，以役西土，勗哉夫子！”——牧誓

Songs of Chu:

- “化而为黃熊，巫何活焉？”——天問
- “焉有虯龍，負熊以游？”——天問
- “獼猴兮熊羆，慕類兮以悲。”
- “虎豹鬥兮熊羆咆，禽獸駭兮亡其曹。”——招隱士 (Western Han 淮南小山)
- “望谿谷兮滄鬱，熊羆兮响嗥。”——九懷 (Western Han 劉向)
- “麒麟奔於九臯兮，熊羆群而逸囿。”——九嘆 (Western Han 王褒)

⇒ **Conclusion 1b:** Except for the two examples in 天問 and the two usages as proper place names in 禹貢, all other cases of 熊 co-occur with 羆, making 熊羆 a lexicalized disyllabic literary word, north and south in the Early Chinese period (defining the Warring States period as the transition of Western to Eastern Han, ca. 500 BCE).

⇒ **Question from 1b:** How does 熊羆 become one lexical item prevalently used throughout so many, if not all, literary pieces that involve “bear”?

1-C. ATTESTATIONS: 羆 (NON-REPETITIVE)

- “獻其貔皮，赤豹黃羆。”——大雅·韓奕 Ode 261
- “羆如熊，黃白文。”——爾雅·釋獸

- ——邢昺’s annotation, citing 陸機 (261–303), a native Wu 吳 scholar of the Three Kingdoms that says: “羆有黃羆，有赤羆。”

⇒ **Conclusion 1c:** Note that 羆 resembles 熊 instead of being defined as 熊. (“如熊，非”熊也”)

⇒ **Questions from 1c:** What is 羆, what is 熊?

1-D. ATTESTATIONS: 能 AS AN ANIMAL

- 鯀三足，能。龜三足，賁。——《爾雅·釋魚》
- 獸名。年来。又奴代、奴登二反。——S. 2071 切三
- “今夢黃能入于寢門，不知人殺乎，抑厲鬼邪？”——《國語·晉語八》
- “能鯀三趾。”——《東京賦》
- (韋昭 annotation: 能, 似熊。)
- “堯使鯀治洪水，不勝其任，遂誅鯀於羽山，化爲黃熊，入於羽泉。今會稽祭禹廟，不用熊，曰黃能，即黃熊也。陸居曰熊，水居曰能。”——《述異記》

⇒ **Conclusion 1d:** It seems that 能 was originally a mythical animal living in water, because it appeared in 釋魚. All these pieces of evidence point to 能’s aquatic ability.

⇒ **Question from 1d:** What was a “能”? Why does 能 never co-occur with 羆? All species of bears can swim, so why 陸居曰熊, 水居曰能?

1-E. ESTABLISHED ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS

- 熊：black bear
- 能：通假 for 熊 = black bear
- 羆：brown bear

II. NATURAL HISTORY

2-A.

The young brown bear (*Ursus arctos*) cub, depending on the species, can have a white “stripe” wrapping

around its chest. After the cub is two years old, the white stripes of some species gradually fade and blend into their brown fur.

Bears having a white stripe (cubs and adult):



Bears whose stripes blend into darker fur in maturity:



2-B.

The Asiatic black bear (*Ursus thibetanus*), or Asian black bear, or Himalayan black bear, “is a medium-sized bear species native to Asia. It lives in the Himalayas, in the northern parts of the Indian subcontinent, Korea, northeastern China, the Russian Far East, the Honshū and Shikoku islands of Japan, and Taiwan. ... They are all good swimmers. They may spend half their life in the trees, but older adults become too heavy to climb.”

2-C.

What significantly marks the Asiatic black bear apart from the American black bear (*Ursus americanus*) is the white stripe on an Asiatic black bear’s chest (a feature that is shared with brown bears). Therefore, the Asiatic black bear is also known as the “moon bear” or “white-chested bear.”



2-D.

Both the brown bears and the Asian black bears can be native to China.

2-E. MIGRATION

According to two new papers this year, published respectively by Laurent Sagart (*PNAS*) and Menghan Zhang (*Nature*), a credible theory is proposed that people migrated from the middle part of the Yellow River (modern mid-Gansu to mid-Henan), where the Yangshao 仰韶 civilization arose, down to Sichuan (where the Qiang 羌 people are), and then into Tibet and further south. (See Laurent Sagart, et al., “Dated language phylogenies shed light on the ancestry of Sino-Tibetan,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 116 [21]: 10317–10322 [May 21, 2019]; Menghan Zhang, et al., “Phylogenetic evidence for Sino-Tibetan origin in northern China in the Late Neolithic,” *Nature* 569, 112–115 [2019]).

This theory would put Proto-Sino-Tibetan (PST) at an era around 5000 BC, coming from northwest China. Therefore, there is an approximately 3,500-year gap from PST to the Oracle Bone Inscriptions — the written records, if any should have existed, are all lost. So, Chinese writing is probably separated from the Proto-Tibeto-Burman by about three millennia.

This theory should also make 嘉絨語 (the Rgyalrongic languages, a branch of the Qiangic languages, the main scholar on which is Randy LaPolla) the closest neighbor to the Chinese language at that time. (This is likely, though the theory awaits further corroboration.)

III. PHONOLOGICAL EVIDENCE AND ESTABLISHED SOUND RULES: 熊

3-A.

熊 EMC *wəŋ > MC wuŋ > Mand. xióng

- The Old Chinese final labial *-m frequently dissimilates to Middle Chinese -ŋ,
- and ə > u, after labial and labialized onsets. (Baxter-Sagart 2014)

⇒ The OC 蒸 > MC 東三 is a regular sound change. Another word that shares the same phenomenon with 熊 is the famous case of 風 *prəm > pung, which rhymes with 林 *rəm > lim and 心 *səm > sim (Odes 7, 27, 132, 192, 229, 236).

3-B.

Proto-Tibeto-Burman (PTB) *d-wam, “bear (n.)” (Matisoff 2003)

⇒ The change of PTB *-wam > -om occurs in several languages such as Kanauri. It may also develop into *-om in Proto-Sino-Tibetan (PST).

	<i>PTB</i>	<i>STC#</i>	<i>WT</i>	<i>Kanauri</i>	<i>Jingpho</i>	<i>WB</i>	<i>Lushai</i>
*bear	*d-wam	461	dom	hom	[lawəp]	wak-wam	sa-vom

(Matisoff 2003, p. 252)

⇒ *d* and *g* are supposed to be in complementary distribution in PTB (although this may not apply to Proto-Sino-Tibetan (PST)), so that acutes and graves never co-occur in pre-initials. Thus, *d-wam may have a potential counterpart in the form of *g-wam in languages that do not have *d* and *g* as allophonic.

⇒ *g-wam > *g-om is possible in PST.

3-C.

Japanese “bear”: *kuma* くま and Sino-Korean “bear”: *gom* 𐎎𐎗

⇒ Although black bears are also native to Japan and Korea, *kuma* and *gom* are highly likely to be loan words from Chinese, which earlier came from the PST.

⇒ In Proto-Japanese (PJ), non-coda mid-vowels become high vowels (Whitman 2008). Therefore, PST *g-om > PJ *koma* > Jp. *kuma*

⇒ In the development from Old Korean to Korean, word-ending vowels are lost. Therefore, PST *g-om > PJ *koma* → OK *koma* (loan from PJ) > Kr. *gom*

⇒ *kuma* and *gom* should be cognates that derived from the possible *g-wam counterpart to the PTB *d-wam “bear” for the languages that contrast *d* and *g* as phonemes.

Note 1: It is difficult to establish a genetic relationship between Japanese and Korean due to lack of stable cognates — and on this point, Whitman’s and Ramsey’s views slightly diverge. The reason Korean and Japanese share common words must be that they are loans. The Japanese homeland is on the southern part of the Korean peninsula. The Korean homeland is in northwest Manchuria. During

the end of the Bronze age (500 BC~300 BC), Koreans moved south into the peninsula, while many Japanese fled south into Japan as the “Yamato” people. Others remained, and some Japanese-descent minority languages remained spoken on the Korean peninsula until around ~700 AD. *koma “bear” and *sema “island” are probably both Proto-Japanese loanwords in Korean.

This note helps elaborate on Matisoff’s opinion that Japanese *kuma* and Korean *kom*, both close to the Old Chinese form, must be loan words due to hunter’s taboo or folk-fear, which militate against using the ordinary native terms, whatever they might be. Matisoff compares this bear-taboo to the European euphemism of “bear” as “honey-eaters” (e.g. Russian *medvedj*). (See Matisoff, *A Handbook of Proto-Tibetan-Burman*, 2003, p. 300.)

⇒ The Old Chinese seems to have a k-prefix, too, based on what Schuessler considers as having an Austro-Asiatic root *k-wəm. Although this remains susceptible to me. — Still, possible sound change:

- PTB *d-wam > ST *K.wom > OC *(K)wəm > EC > wəm > MC EMC *wəŋ > MC *wuy* > ‘Phags-pa *γyuy* > Mand. *xióng* /*çiun*/ “bear”

(We may now be clearer about how Japanese *kuma* and Sino-Korean *gom* both relate to our Mandarin *xióng*. Nonetheless, it was probably just a common word among very early settlers passed along to new people settling the area.)

The Schuessler 2007 data for comparative evidence (although he does not really base his reconstruction on these data):

xióng₂ 熊 (juŋ) LH wəm, OCM *wəm

‘A bear’ [Shi]. Acc. to SW, *yán* 炎 OCM *wam is phonetic; if true, *yán* would confirm the final *-m in *xióng*, and *xióng* the initial *w- in *yán*.

[T] *Sin Sukchu SR* ɣjuŋ (平); *MGZY Hýung* (平) [ɣjuŋ]; *ONW* ɣuəm?? > ɣuŋ (?) > huŋ

[D] The OC final *-m is preserved in Mǐn dialects: Amoy *him*^{A2}, Fú’ān *hem*^{A2}, Yǒng’ān *ham*^{A2} ‘bear’.

[E] ST: PTB *d-wam > WT *dom* ‘bear’, Tebor *hom*, Jiarong *twǒm*; PL *k-d-wam, WB (*wak-*) *wam*; Bahing *wam*; Digaro *təham* ~ *təhum* (*HST*: 40); Kuki-Naga *d-wam, Lushai *sa^L-vəm^H*; Mru *tom*. Other lgs. in East Asia have words which look similar: Middle Korean *kwom*, Old Japanese *kuma* (Miyake 1997: 197), Ainu *kamuy* ‘bear’; on Taiwan AN languages include *cumai* / *cumay*. Note also AA: PMonic *kmum ‘Himalayan black bear’.

3-D.

Schuessler notes that a lot of black/dark things have -m endings in Proto-Sino-Tibetan (PST). These words are probably a word family:

- 暗 ə^hmh (ˆ signifies type A, glottalized vowel quality according to Baxter-Sagart 2014)
- 陰 əm
- 黔 gəm
- 黓 də^hm
- 曇 də^hm

This makes the “black bear” ending with an -m convenient, even natural.

3-E.

The homeland of Austro-Asiatic speaking regions, including the modern Canton, have a completely different word for “bear” from wam/wəm.

IV. RELATIONS: 熊，羆，能

For the historical sound changes of 熊, see the end of 3-c.

4-A. WHAT IS A “羆”

What exactly is a 羆? Why do 熊羆 always co-occur? How is it that this is a single lexical item attested in most pre-Qin literature (a question asked in 1-b)?

羆 in *Shuowen*: 如熊，黃白文。从熊，罷省聲。古文从皮。

⇒ 羆 “brown bear” *pray > pe > pí

⇒ 斑 “stripe, striped” *prán > pan > bān (as in 斑馬)

⇒ both 羆 and 斑, only differentiating in open (-y) versus nasal ending (-n), are able to be traced back to a common proto-sound: PTB *pral.

⇒ The process goes: PTB *pral > splitting into 1) 羆 *pray and 2) 斑 *prán (with faucalization of the vowel).

⇒ Therefore, 羆 and 斑 are cognates.

⇒ Combined with the features of Brown Bears in section II, 羆 = bear with 斑 = “如熊, 黃白文”! Since some adult brown bears’ white stripes fade, this is why 羆 is described by 陸機 and 詩經 as 赤羆/黃羆, while by 許慎 and 爾雅 as 黃白文. All of these seem to be brown bears, but some would feature the “white stripe,” while others would not.

⇒ Since 熊, Asian black bears, also have a white stripe on the chest (that is why they are called “white-chested bears” (as in 2-b and 2-c), it becomes extremely natural for our ancestors to put these two kinds of bears (black and brown) together in the same category of animals, and represent them as a single one, using a lexicalized, disyllabic word. There is a second possible word-structure for 熊羆: since 羆 is a cognate of 斑, one may also explain 熊羆 as 熊斑 = 斑熊 = striped bear (as one word for one kind of striped beast despite its color). Just like 公雞=雞公, the inverted position of stative verbs (修飾詞倒置) is one of the main features of the Southern Sinitic topolects (compared to their Northern counterparts). It is hard to tell whether the word-formation of 熊羆 belongs to the first or the second structure, but both work theoretically.

4-B. WHAT IS A “能”

能 in *Shuowen*: 熊屬。足似鹿。从肉己聲。能獸堅中，故稱賢能；而彊壯，稱能傑也。凡能之屬皆从能。

⇒ 能 “a kind of black bear” *nə(ŋ) > nəŋ > néng. (A pretty stable word!)

⇒ 能 represents two words: “bear (n.); “capable.” As for “capable,” it is a cognate to 佞 “capable” OC *nəjŋ > niŋ. The 仁 in 尚書·金縢, “予仁若考能，能多材多藝，能事鬼神” has the variant 佞 in the Qinghua Chu bamboo manuscripts (清華簡). The meaning of “bear” for 能 does seem to be more likely coming from an Austro-Asiatic (AA) language than our intuitive 熊.

- néng₁** 能 (nəŋ) LH nə(ŋ), OCM *nō !
 'A kind of bear' [Guoyu] apparently an area word of AA origin: Kharia *bənci* 'bear' (-i is suffix), Santali *bana* 'Indian black bear' -> TB-Lepcha *sā-na* 'bear'.
- néng₂** 能 (nəŋ) LH nə(ŋ), OCM *nōŋ, *nō?
 'Be capable, have ability, can' [Shi]. *Shijing* rimes indicate OCM *nō?. Prob. cognate to → *níng₁* 儻 'capable'.
 [T] *Sin Sukchu SR* nəŋ (平), *PR, LR* nəŋ; *MGZY* n'ing (平) [nəŋ]; *ONW* nəŋ
 [E] ? ST: WT *nus-pa* 'be able'; WB *nuiŋ* 'prevail, conquer; verb affix: potential', Mru *nōŋ* 'be able' (Löffler 1966: 142).

(Schuessler 2007, p. 398)

⇒ While 熊 is more likely to derive from PTB, 能 might be derived from AA. Then, since 能 as the grammatical word “capable” became too widely used, the general word for “bear” gave way to 熊 only. 熊羆, at the same time, still kept being used in literary languages throughout the history of Chinese literature, e.g.:

- “虎豹夾路啼，熊羆對我蹲。”——《北上太行山》by 曹操 (155–220)
- “平生未省夢熊羆，稚女如花墜曉枝。”——《哭小女癡兒》by 李群玉 (808–862)
- “更須誇蘭玉祥開，何必慮熊羆占緩？”——《四喜記》by 謝讜 (1512–1569)

⇒ As we saw in 1-d (refer back to 1-d for contexts):

- “鰲三足，能。”
- “獸名。年來。”
- “能鰲三趾。”
- “堯使鯀治洪水，不勝其任，遂誅鯀於羽山，化爲黃熊，入於羽泉。”
- even “焉有虯龍，負熊以游” in “Heavenly Questions”

They all suggest an aquatic nature for the 能/熊 animal. Is it only because a bear swims well?

⇒ My conjecture is inspired by a modern 方言詞彙: 鰲熊. The word 鰲熊 is attested in a proverb in the topolect of 陝西關中: “靈性人是鰲熊的奴”. 鰲熊 = 王八, thus 鰲熊 is a vulgar way to refer to a “wretched guy.” This IS the 能鰲, or maybe even 黃熊, that still survives in modern vernacular Chinese topolects! If we should refer to “bear” as the totem of the Chu culture, might it even be possible that 能/熊/能鰲, the soft-shell turtle (*Trionychidae*), is the real totem of the watery regions of Southern China, which can be carried on a dragon's back and swim, even dive into the deep springs? However well a bear can swim, I doubt that it dives deep.

⇒ If so, then “陸居曰熊, 水居曰能” makes complete sense in 任昉’s 《述異記》.

⇒ This hypothesis can be corroborated if we can find a neighboring language that uses a word similar to /nə(ŋ)/ for turtle.

4-C.

There were three words for “bears”, i.e., three ways to name the bear in the ancient Sinitic world, the phonetic structures of which are respectively *BAY (Proto-Tibeto-Burman), *Nə (Austro-Asiatic), and *WəM (Proto-Sino-Tibetan). We do not need to correlate them and make a single ancestor for all these sounds. It is not strange at all to have three words representing one object.

4-D.

Why do the two distinct words for “bear” — 熊 and 能 — look so similar in form?

- 熊 *wəm in *Shuowen*: 獸似豕。山居，冬蟄。从能，炎省聲。凡熊之屬皆从熊。

⇒ 炎: *wam.

⇒ Now the 炎省聲 part makes sense, as 熊 and 炎 only differ in the quality of their vowels in the Early Chinese (pre-Xu Shen) period. However, this is not the whole story. Polyphony may be a better explanation. This point marks a good time to step into the next section: paleography.

V. PALEOGRAPHY AND WHY THE CHARACTER 熊 REPRESENTS “BEAR”

5-A.

None of the three appear in the Oracle Bone Inscriptions. However, we need to keep in mind that the OBI only represents one aspect of Chinese written records, and it is already 3.5 millennia apart from the PTB/PST, even the TB/ST time.

5-B. CHU BRONZE INSCRIPTION: 熊



《楚系簡帛文字編》'08 滕壬生 p. 871















《楚文字編》李守奎 '03 p. 584



《殷周金文集成》No. 11358 in 增補卷 7, p. 617

Note that the same character (the second one from the top right), which 李守奎 rendered as 熊, is rendered completely differently in 殷周金文集成. The meaning seems to imply a proper name. I don't know the reason for such a rendition, but I suspect that it might be wrong. (I will explain in 5-f.)

5-C. CHU BRONZE INSCRIPTION: 能

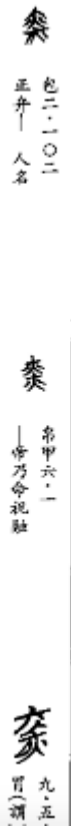
 <p>郭·老丙·一三 是以一捕(獲)璊(萬)勿(物)之自朕(然)</p>	 <p>郭·老甲·三八 莫一默(守)也</p>	 <p>郭·老甲·一三 而弗一為</p>	 <p>郭·老甲·一三 僕王一守之</p>	 <p>郭·老甲·九 竺(默)一濁以未(靜)者</p>	 <p>郭·老甲·三 以其一為百浴(浴)下</p>
 <p>郭·老五·九 思不一俄(長)</p>	 <p>郭·老乙·九 蓋(懂)一於於</p>	 <p>郭·老甲·一八 僕王女(如)一</p>	 <p>郭·老甲·一二 是古(故)聖人</p>	 <p>郭·老甲·一〇 竺(默)一危以</p>	 <p>郭·老甲·五 古(故)天下莫</p>

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	郭·前二·53		郭·前二·54		郭·前三·13		郭·前三·19
	郭·后28						
	郭·前19		郭·后19		郭·后22		郭·后22
	郭·后20	夷與之近同。					
	郭·大7		郭·五9		郭·五9		
	郭·六19		郭·六43		郭·前二·83		

《楚文字編》李守奎'03 p. 583

5-D. CHU BRONZE INSCRIPTION: 炎



《楚系簡帛文字編》'08 滕王生 p. 874



《楚文字編》李守奎 '03 p. 587

5-E.

Let's come back to the story in 4-d: the whole story behind 炎省聲, aside from sharing the same onset and coda between 熊 and 炎. Indeed the graph of 熊 is 能+炎, but what 滕壬生 annotated under 熊 — “從能從大，大乃火之譌” — is mistaken. (See the first picture in 5-b.)

⇒ From the previous analyses, we already know that 熊 and 能 do not share any phonetic value. They do not even share the same proto-language family. 能 is not a phonophoric of 熊.

⇒ I therefore propose that 能 and 熊 are both unit characters (文), not a compound (字). This proposal first explains why our ingenious 許慎 says “凡熊之屬皆从熊” and “凡能之屬皆从能” separately. The lower part of the graph 熊, which resembles a 大 or 火, was at the beginning simply a part of the graph, just as there is not a 人 in the graph of 天. However, as unit characters start to bear multiple readings (*wam and *pray in this case as our language develops, people migrate, and different cultures interacted and merged), people need to purposively clarify that this unit character should read

more like *wam rather than *pray. It does not necessarily mean that 炎, or *wam, is the phonophoric of 熊. It is simply a means to distinguish the readings of the two unit characters.

⇒ Why do 能 and 熊 look so similar? SOLVED!

5-F.

Then, what did these two graphs (熊, 能) originally write before they were used to write “bear”?

⇒ We do not know. Since 熊 is used in proper names — place names 熊耳 in 尚書·禹貢, and surnames of the Chu nobles — the graph 熊 may be used to write native Chu names. But we have no idea what 能 was used to write, at all.

⇒ Thus: there is a native Chinese beast, “black (striped) bear,” which is named *wəm in Early Chinese. There is a Chu proper name, written as “熊,” the original pronunciation of which we do not know. 熊, the character, starts to be used to represent “bear.” Since a bear is a common native animal, “熊” becomes the written form of *wəm, such that subsequently no one remembered what the 熊 graph originally represented. Ditto for 能, which is even more dead than 熊 — at least we know that 熊 could signify a place name, or a noble clan’s surname.

⇒ This makes the clerical transcription of the same graph on 羨陵公戈 in 殷周金文集成 a complete “望文生義” (“taking a text too literally; interpreting a text with superficial explanations”). Well, “望典生義” (“taking a canon too literally; interpreting a canon with superficial explanations”), to be more precise. Clearly the interpreter knew those Chu names from historical records in the first place, before forcibly fixing upon an archaic glyph.

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