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# To Write or to Seal?

New Evidence on Literacy Practices in Early Imperial China

## Introduction

Since William V. Harris' pioneering work on Greco-Roman literacy in 1989, the topic of literacy in the ancient world continues to this day to be frequently discussed.<sup>1</sup> Drawing inspiration from the new approaches to literacy studies in anthropology and education studies,<sup>2</sup> instead of treating literacy as a quantifiable skill that can be applied universally, most scholars of ancient history have started to see literacy as an embedded social practice and emphasise the particular social and cultural contexts in which literacy is employed in achieving specific goals. As Rosalind Thomas puts it: "Rather than see 'literacy' as an independent, separable skill, researchers as well as teachers in the field tend to wish to see it more as an embedded activity—or to see a tension between the social context and the potentialities of writing".<sup>3</sup> As such, in the area of early China, multiple literacies were coined in order to accommodate different contexts in which literacy skill was put in practice.<sup>4</sup> While such an approach focuses on the literacy acquired by an individual or a social group in a particular context, Charles Sanft has recently brought to our attention the concept of 'literate community', in which individuals of different levels of reading and writing skills interact with texts on various occasions.<sup>5</sup> Sanft's application of the concept into the context of early China has generated meaningful discussion in literacy studies across different disciplines.<sup>6</sup>

Along with this growing interest in literacy studies of early China is the increasing amount of bamboo and wooden manuscripts excavated in recent decades, which provide indispensable and new bodies of evidence for testing these approaches.<sup>7</sup> Of them

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1 Harris 1989. A large number of journal articles, monographs or edited volumes are devoted to the topic since Harris' book. See, for example: Bowman/Woolf 1996; Johnson/Parker 2009; Eckardt 2018; Kolb 2018.

2 See, for example: Street 2003, 77–91.

3 Thomas 2009, 14.

4 For 'craftsman's literacy', see: Barbieri-Low 2011; for 'administrative literacy', see: Ma 2017; for 'scribal literacy', see: Foster 2021; for discussions on multiple literacies, see: Yates 2011; Hsing 2021c.

5 Sanft 2019.

6 See: Bagnall 2019; Long 2019.

7 For a general introduction, see: Ma 2020a.

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the bamboo and wooden administrative texts excavated from storage pit no.1 (J1) at Wuyiguangchang 五一廣場 (May 1st Square) in the city of Changsha 長沙, Hunan 湖南 province in 2010 have not yet received much attention, especially in Western academic circles.<sup>8</sup> This article examines a few examples from the discoveries at Wuyiguangchang to demonstrate how seals were applied as an alternative means of writing to verify one's identity and vouch for others in the early Chinese administration. The examples presented in this article show that the decision to seal rather than write was not necessarily due to the lack of writing ability, but simply because sealing as a form of literacy practices in early China shared a significant part of the functions of writing. Individuals in early China appear to have enjoyed a certain degree of freedom in choosing to write or to seal in some specific contexts.

## The Use of Seals in Early China

The use of seals in East Asian culture is so unique and widespread that it is perhaps not unfamiliar to any student or scholar of Chinese history, yet the functions of the seals in the early imperial period were quite different than those developed in later periods. As a symbol of their status, only the seals of the emperor (*huangdi* 皇帝) and regional kings (*zhuhou wang* 諸侯王) were named *xi* 璽, while the seals held by the officials or commoners were called *zhang* 章 or *yin* 印. The first Chinese dictionary, *Explaining the Graphs and Analysing the Characters* (*Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字), states: “*Yin*, the tokens held by the governors” 印, 執政所持信也.<sup>9</sup> According to the Qing 清 scholar Duan Yucai 段玉裁, the “governors” (*zhizheng* 執政) refer to those who held official positions. Each Han official who was ranked at or above 200 bushels (*shi* 石) was issued an official seal accompanied by a silk ribbon (*shou* 綬), both of which were produced in imperial workshops or private workshops under official supervision. Those who were ranked below 200 bushels could use the seal of their affiliated office when they were on duty. According to the imperial regulations, the material and decoration of an individual's seal and the colour of its silk ribbon had to match his salary grade (*zhi* 秩).<sup>10</sup>

A more standardised system of the official seals was introduced in the fourth year of Yuanshou 元狩 of Emperor Wu 武 (119 BCE). Officials whose salary-grade were 200 bushels or above would be issued “official seals” (*tong guan yin* 通官印), known as “square-inch seals” (*fang cun zhi yin* 方寸之印),<sup>11</sup> while those who were

<sup>8</sup> To my knowledge, the only work devoted to this finding in Western languages so far is: Yates 2019.

<sup>9</sup> *Shuowen jiezi zhu* 1988, 9A.33A.

<sup>10</sup> For the official seal system, see: Wang 1997; Lin 1998. For the official silk ribbon system, see: Abe 2000; Abe 2012.

<sup>11</sup> The estimation of one Han *cun* 寸 changed slightly from the Western to Eastern Han. The surface area of one Han square-inch seal was supposed to be c. 5.34 cm<sup>2</sup> (2.31 × 2.31 cm) in the Western Han compared to 5.64 cm<sup>2</sup> (2.375 × 2.375 cm) in the Eastern Han. Unless otherwise stated, the conversion rates follow: Luo 1994, 3.

ranked below 200 bushels could only use “smaller official seals” (*xiao guan yin* 小官印) known as “half-sized seals” (*ban tong yin* 半通印).<sup>12</sup> Each official would have to return his seal when he left his position. Along with the official salary grade, carriage (*yu* 輿) and clothing (*fu* 服) systems, the official seal and silk ribbon system was part of a hierarchical and visual Han official system, in which, ideally, each official was defined by the salary he received, the carriage he rode, the clothes he wore and the seal and ribbon he carried.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to the official seals issued by the Han government, both officials and commoners could own private seals (*siyin* 私印).<sup>14</sup> Although private seals, in terms of their scripts and decorations, appeared to be much less regularized,<sup>15</sup> Han wooden slips recovered from the north-western region indicate that superior officials, such as the Company Commander (*hou* 候), would use their private seals for conducting official business and their subordinates could use their private seals when acting (*xing* 行) temporarily on behalf of their superiors.<sup>16</sup>

Enno Giele and Hsing I-tien 邢義田 have both indicated that seals in early China performed part of the functions of a modern signature.<sup>17</sup> In a recent study, Liu Hsin-ning 劉欣寧 puts sealing along with handwriting and tally-matching as the three means of verification in Han China.<sup>18</sup> By impressing his official or private seal onto clay (*fengni* 封泥) on the envelope or cover (*fengjian* 封檢),<sup>19</sup> or directly onto the document itself, one verified that he was the sender of the document or would take responsibility for its contents, even though in some cases his subordinate or representative would carry out this action on his behalf.<sup>20</sup> It is also worth mentioning that although the practice of sealing is different from our usual understanding of the act of writing, namely ‘putting pen to paper’,<sup>21</sup> the “script for official seals” (*moyin* 摹印) was nonetheless one of the six or eight forms of scripts that a hereditary scribe

<sup>12</sup> The width of a half-sized seal is said to be 5 *fen* 分 (approximately 1.16 cm in the Western Han and 1.19 cm in the Eastern Han): Wang 1997, 86; Lin 1998, 154. In fact, there are also a small number of official seals which were rectangular in shape and smaller official seals square in shape, which seems to have deviated from the official regulations. See, for example: Luo 1987, 35–36.

<sup>13</sup> For such a hierarchical and visual system, see: Hsing 2021d.

<sup>14</sup> See Zhao 2012, 72–87.

<sup>15</sup> In a silk letter found from Xuanquan zhi 懸泉置, Dunhuang 敦煌, Yuan 元 requested Zifang 子方 to carve a private seal on Lü Zidu’s 呂子都 behalf. The seal was expected to be of Censor (*yushi* 御史) style—which means that it should be made of silver and decorated with a turtle knob—and its width should have been 7 *fen* (approximately 1.62 cm in the Western Han or 1.66 cm in the Eastern Han): Hu/Zhang 2001, 187–91. For an English translation of this letter, see: Giele 2015, 430–435.

<sup>16</sup> See: Hou 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Giele 2005, 353–361; Hsing 2021b, 143–147.

<sup>18</sup> Liu 2021, 90–91.

<sup>19</sup> For a recent study on the sealing practices, see: Lü 2018.

<sup>20</sup> This appears to be a worldwide practice in ancient administration. For the use of seals in the Achaemenid Persian Empire, see: Lewis 1996, 31–32.

<sup>21</sup> See: Selbitschka 2018, 416.

(*shi* 史) during the Qin and early Han had to master.<sup>22</sup> The examples examined below attest that sealing could be used as an alternative means of writing to vouch for others. They reveal that the persons who chose to use sealing to vouch for others were not necessarily unable to write, but also included the scribes who were expected to be well trained in writing.

## The Guarantee System in the Eastern Han Society: Evidence from the Wuyiguangchang Site

The city of Changsha is famous for its enormous number of bamboo and wooden manuscripts excavated from abandoned wells or storage pits in the last three decades. In 1996, more than 100,000 bamboo and wooden slips and tablets of the Wu 吳 Kingdom (222–280 CE), about 70,000 of which were inscribed with Chinese characters, were recovered from well no. 22 at Zoumalou 走馬樓. Since then, at least five other groups of bamboo and wooden manuscripts were found in the nearby area. The dating of these manuscripts spans from the mid-Western Han 西漢 to Three Kingdoms 三國 periods (second century BCE–third century CE). The corpus examined in this article was discovered in 2010 when the Wuyiguangchang station of the Changsha subway was under construction. Located at the centre of Changsha city, the site is twenty meters north of another site where approximately 2,000 Western Han bamboo and wooden manuscripts were excavated in 2002 and 80 meters northeast of the above-mentioned Zoumalou site.<sup>23</sup> Both the transmitted and excavated evidence attest that the Wuyiguangchang site and the nearby area were very possibly the office of Linxiang 臨湘 County (*xian* 縣) or Marquisate (*houguo* 侯國), which was under the jurisdiction of Changsha Kingdom (*wangguo* 王國) in the Western Han and later Changsha Commandery (*jun* 郡) in the Eastern Han and Wu Kingdom periods.<sup>24</sup>

Storage pit no. 1 was found beneath the fifteenth level of archaeological pit no. 1 (T1). Archaeological evidence shows that the fifteenth level roughly dates to the mid-late Eastern Han 東漢 to Wei-Jin 魏晉 periods (second–fifth centuries CE). According to a preliminary archaeological report, storage pit no. 1 is 3.6 meters in diameter and 1.5 meters deep and can be further divided into three levels. However, except for a brief description, the archaeologists have not yet disclosed the details regarding the distribution of the bamboo and wooden manuscripts in these three levels.<sup>25</sup> A small selection consisting of 26 pieces of manuscripts was made public in the preliminary archaeological report in 2013.<sup>26</sup> Two years later, a larger selection of 176 representative

<sup>22</sup> See: Hsing 2011. See also: Barbieri-Low/Yates 2015, 1103–1104, n. 14.

<sup>23</sup> Changsha shi wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo 2013 (hereafter *JB*), 4.

<sup>24</sup> See: Ma 2020a, 548–50.

<sup>25</sup> *JB*, 5–6.

<sup>26</sup> *JB*, 14–25.

pieces or fragments with annotations was published by a research team composed of four institutes in mainland China.<sup>27</sup> From 2018 to 2021, the same team published six volumes containing 2,600 pieces or fragments, which account for more than one-third of the total number.<sup>28</sup> Of concern to this present study is that this corpus of materials contains invaluable information for the first time revealing the operation of the guarantee system in the Eastern Han society.<sup>29</sup>

As previous research has shown, criminals sentenced to hard labour during the Han were requested to provide guarantors to vouch for their conduct during their sentences. For those who could secure guarantors, they could be exempt from wearing restraints such as collars or manacles at work.<sup>30</sup> Yet, before the discovery of the Wuyiguangchang materials, the actual operation of the vouching system was not known. A wooden two-column (*mu lianghang* 木兩行) slip included in the *Changsha Wuyiguangchang Dong Han jiandu xuanshi 2015* (hereafter *XS*) reads:

**92 (2010CWJ1③:325-1-15)<sup>31</sup>**

[Line 1] 分、敢等十七人傳任。趙、撫、古、非，亡人，未得任。輒逕召催促撫、非家屬。即日撫母予、非母委

[Line 2] 詣鄉，辭：撫、非前逕(速)，從沉牢(?)亡，今無肯任撫、非等。盡力曉喻，撫、非今出具任。任具復言。唯

Seventeen people including Fan and Gan have registered [the information of their] guarantors. Zhao, Fu, Gu and Fei are absconders and they have not secured guarantors. [I] immediately summon the families of Fu and Fei and urge them [to secure guarantors]. Yu, Fu's mother, and Wei, Fei's mother came to [the office of] the District on the same day and stated that, "Fu and Fei were previously arrested and they absconded from the prison of Yuan... Now, no one is willing to vouch for Fu, Fei and the others." [I] did my utmost to instruct them. Fu and Fei have now provided [the information of] their guarantors. [I] report again after they have provided [the information of] their guarantors. [I] beg...

Probably tied with other wooden slips as a multi-piece document submitted to the higher authority, the above quoted wooden two-column slip from the Wuyiguangchang site reveals that absconders like Fu 撫 and Fei 非 would be requested to register their guarantors in governmental records. Yet, as stated in their mothers' statements, for absconders like them, it was not easy to secure guarantors, which implies that

<sup>27</sup> *Changsha Wuyiguangchang Dong Han jiandu xuanshi 2015* (hereafter *XS*).

<sup>28</sup> *Changsha Wuyiguangchang Dong Han jiandu 2018–2020* (hereafter *JD*).

<sup>29</sup> For the guarantee system in Tang and Song China: Niida 1983, 296–329.

<sup>30</sup> Yu 2012, 296–303.

<sup>31</sup> Note that the publication numbers in *XS* are different from those in *JD*, even though the same piece or fragment would appear in both editions. Unless otherwise stated, the transcriptions of Wuyiguangchang materials cited in this article are all from *JD*. Each publication number of a piece or fragment will be accompanied with an original excavation number in a round brackets. Also note that the sign + between two publication numbers indicates they are fragments of the same piece and have been recovered by the research team.

the persons who vouched for them would be held legally responsible if they were to abscond again or commit further crimes.<sup>32</sup> Li Junming 李均明, a lead member of the research team, has recently pointed out that each of the officials or commoners awaiting trial would have to secure “five guarantors” (*ren wu ren* 任五人).<sup>33</sup> This matches the records inscribed on bricks discovered in the graves of convicted labourers near the Eastern Han capital of Luoyang 洛陽. The title *wuren* 五任 indicates that the hard-labour convict who bore the title had found five persons to guarantee that he would not abscond or commit any crime during his sentenced term, even though he might not survive his term.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, the evidence from Wuyiguangchang reveals that the persons who acted as guarantors for the convicts or the accused were expected to be men of “integrity and sincerity” (*wanhou* 完厚),<sup>35</sup> preferably serving in official positions (*li* 吏).<sup>36</sup>

Through a close examination of two pairs of examples from the Wuyiguangchang site, this article demonstrates that the guarantors could vouch for the guarantee by writing their own names or using their seals. Incorporating the unearthed evidence from the Juyan 居延 site in modern Inner Mongolia 內蒙古 and Gansu 甘肅 province, it appears that individuals were inevitably confronted with the choice of either to write or to seal on different occasions in the early Chinese administration.

### To Vouch for a Person by One’s Handwriting

The first pair of examples consists of two wooden two-column slips (nos. 441 and 1120) from the Wuyiguangchang site, on which two Writing Assistants (*shuzuo* 書佐)—Hu Dou 胡竇 and Chen Xin 陳訢—from Linxiang county served as guarantors for Constable (*tingzhang* 亭長) Hu Xiang 胡詳 of Xiaogong 效功 police station and guaranteed that he would not abscond. Hu Xiang was probably awaiting trial at the time and his case should have entered the judicial process. These two wooden documents were made on the same day in almost identical handwriting in the same format. According to the data provided by the research team, their size is also roughly the same. While no. 441 is 23.4 cm long and 3 cm wide, no. 1120 is 23 cm long and 3 cm wide. As sug-

<sup>32</sup> It is also stated in the early Han legal regulations that those who guaranteed a person to be an official would hold legal responsibility for his misconduct or incompetence. See: Barbieri-Low/Yates 2015, 649–650.

<sup>33</sup> See nos. 540 (2010CWJ1③:261-20), 655 (2010CWJ1③:263-5) and 449+5876+5867+4344+3778+2574 (2010CWJ1③:205-8+291-142+291-133+285-304+284-906+283-22).

<sup>34</sup> Li 2017, 2. See also: Yu 2012, 296–303. The hard-labor convicts during the Han were usually sent to perform the most dangerous or nasty work and probably would have died before they finished serving their terms. See: Barbieri-Low 2007, 255.

<sup>35</sup> See: no. 540 (2010CWJ1③:261-20).

<sup>36</sup> See: no. 449+5876+5867+4344+3778+2574 (2010CWJ1③:205-8+291-142+291-133+285-304+284-906+283-22).

gested by Li Junming, the accused would have to find “five guarantors” to vouch for them.<sup>37</sup> These two wooden two-column slips might have been tied with other wooden slips carrying three other guarantors’ vouches for Hu Xiang, for there are still clear traces of binding on them. The writers appeared to be quite conscious to leave blank spaces for two sets of cords running through the slips (Fig. 1).

**441A (2010CWJ1③:204A)**

(Line 1) 永元十七年四月甲申朔十二 (blank) 日乙未書佐胡竇敢言 (blank) 之願葆任效功亭長  
(Line 2) 胡詳不桃(逃)亡竇手書 (blank) 敢言之

**441B (2010CWJ1③:204B)**

門下書佐王史<sup>38</sup> (blank) □

**Recto side**

On the Yiwei day, the twelfth day of the fourth month whose first day is Jiashen, in the seventeenth year of Yongyuan (of Emperor He) (105 CE), Writing Assistant Hu Dou ventures to state: [I] wish to vouch for the Constable of Xiaogong police station Hu Xiang and guarantee that he will not abscond. Dou, by his handwriting, ventures to state.

**Verso side**

Writing Assistant of Beneath-the-Door Wang Shi...

**1120 (2010CWJ1③:264-274A)**

(Line 1) 永元十七年四月甲申朔十二 (blank) 日乙未書佐陳訢敢言 (blank) 之願葆任效功亭  
(Line 2) 長胡詳不桃(逃)亡訢手 (blank) 書敢言之

**1120 (2010CWJ1③:264-274B)**

金曹佐王史□

**Recto side**

On the Yiwei day, the twelfth day of the fourth month whose first day is Jiashen, in the seventeenth year of Yongyuan (of Emperor He) (105 CE), Writing Assistant Chen Xin ventures to state: [I] wish to vouch for the Constable of Xiaogong police station Hu Xiang and guarantee that he will not abscond. Xin, by his handwriting, ventures to state.

**Verso side**

Assistant of Bureau of Finance Wang Shi...

Particularly important to our discussion is the term *shoushu* 手書 mentioned in these two documents. In translating it, I have opted for the term ‘handwriting’. At first glance, the writing on the recto sides of these two documents appears to have been

<sup>37</sup> Li 2017, 2.

<sup>38</sup> JD leaves this character untranscribed. However, it should be read as *shi* 史, if we compare the same character in: 1120 (2010CWJ1③:264-274B).

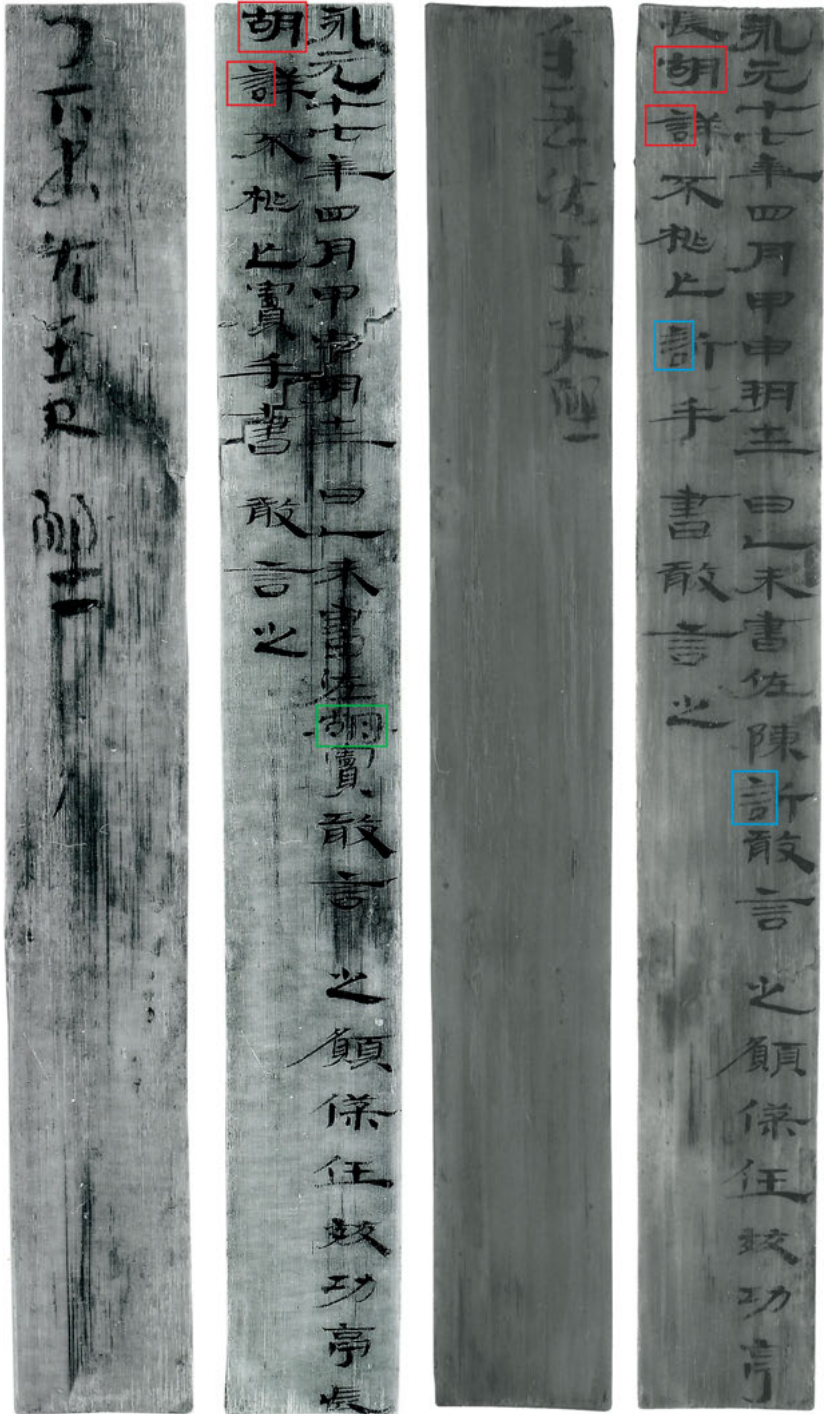


Fig. 1: Wuyiguangchang nos. 441 verso, 441 recto, 1120 verso and 1120 recto (from left to right).



written by the same hand. Yet a closer look at their names, comparing them to the same character or the same radical in the rest of the documents, reveals that their names were written by different hands, possibly by the guarantors themselves (Fig. 2 and 3).



Fig. 2: The handwriting of the character *hu* 胡 in Wuyiguangchang nos. 441 and 1120.

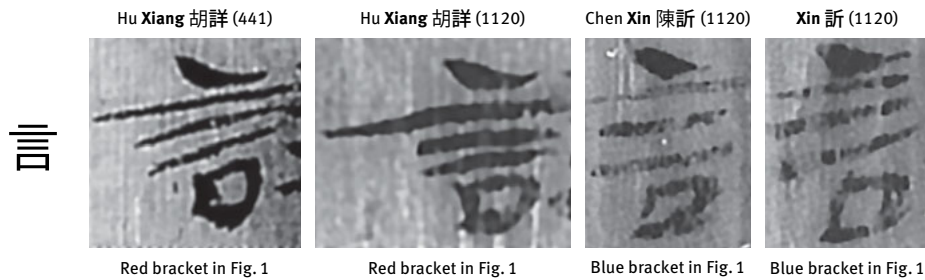


Fig. 3: The handwriting of the radical *yan* 言 in Wuyiguangchang nos. 441 and 1120.

The guarantor Hu Dou and the guarantee Hu Xiang shared the same surname *Hu*, which provides important evidence for examining my theory. Hu Xiang's full name appears respectively in nos. 441 and 1120 and the handwriting looks almost the same. However, the handwriting of Hu Dou's surname seems to be different from that of Hu Xiang: the two horizontal strokes in the radical *yue* 月 were apparently simplified as two round dots (Fig. 2). Similarly, the handwriting of the radical *yan* 言 in Chen Xin's given name is also different from that of Hu Xiang. The first horizontal stroke in the radical *yan* of the character *xin* 訢 was written shorter than that in the character *xiang* 詳 (Fig. 3). As such, the names of the guarantors Hu Dou and Chen Xin could have been written by other hands and, I would suggest, very possibly by the guarantors themselves. If this is the case, it could explain the usage of the term *shoushu* in this context. Hu Dou and Chen Xin vouched for Hu Xiang by writing their names on the documents. These two examples suggest that even though the act of writing one's own name in Han China could not be understood as synonymous with signing in the

modern sense, it did serve the function of authentication, especially when vouching for others.<sup>39</sup>

Given the similar handwriting in the rest of the two documents, they could have been prepared by the same person—Wang Shi 王史—as recorded on the verso sides. The handwriting of the verso sides looks much less formal and Wang Shi’s official titles appear to be less standardised: one as Writing Assistant of Beneath-the-Door (*menxia shuzuo* 門下書佐) and the other as Assistant of Bureau of Finance (*jincuo zuo* 金曹佐). Both titles could refer to an assistant position affiliated to a specific bureau (*cao* 曹) serving directly under the Magistrate (*xianling* 縣令). The “Door” in the term “Beneath-the-Door” (*menxia*) could originally refer to the physical door of the private chamber of the Magistrate and the officials whose title contained the term might have actually served by the door of the private chamber,<sup>40</sup> but as time passed, the term only indicated one’s closeness to the Magistrate. The character right after Wang Shi’s name, which has not been transcribed, might indicate his role in the vouching process, which I will revisit in the following section when we encounter this character again.

### To Vouch for a Person by Sealing

The second pair of documents demonstrates how sealing could be used as an alternative to writing in the vouching process. In comparison to the first pair of documents discussed above, this pair does not start with the date as most administrative documents are supposed to. Additionally, we do not see the common term “venture to state” (*gan yin zhi* 敢言之) that appears in most documents submitted to the higher authority—although no. 526+534 does start with the term *pibao* 辟報 indicating that it was a report made at someone’s request. They might have been sent along with a formal written report addressing the recipient. The reason that I put them into one group for examination is that the two guarantors—Scribe of the Bureau of Household (*hucao shi* 戶曹史) Qi Mo 棋莫 and Scribe of the Bureau of the Left Granary (*zuo cangcao shi* 左倉曹史) Xue Xi 薛憲—both vouched for the same person, Probationary Scribe (*shou shi* 守史) Zhang Pu 張普. They both guaranteed that Zhang Pu would not abscond and would come to the office when summoned. As shown in the previous section, there might have been three other guarantors vouching for Zhang Pu. The most striking feature of these documents is that a seal clay case (*fengni xia* 封泥匣) was made in the middle of the documents for holding the seal clay. This is the first time

<sup>39</sup> Hsing I-tien has argued that a lot of superiors’ ‘signatures’ (*shuming* 署名) in the Han administrative routine were actually written by their entrusted subordinates. The authority of the superiors was mostly represented by their seals: Hsing 2021a. Judging from the examples examined above, however, the subordinates (two Writing Assistants) could verify their vouches by using their self-written names just like a modern signature.

<sup>40</sup> See: Zou 2008, 50–51.

that we have encountered such concrete evidence demonstrating how the guarantors vouched for the guarantee by using their seals in early China (Fig. 4).

**526+534A (2010CWJ1③:261-3+261-13A)**

辟報：戶曹史棋莫詣曹願保任  守史張普不逃亡徵召可得以床(癸)

**526+534B (2010CWJ1③:261-3+261-13B)**

印為信 史郭

**Recto side**

Report: Scribe of the Bureau of Household, Qi Mo, comes to the Bureau and wishes to vouch for  Probationary Scribe Zhang Pu and guarantee that he will not abscond and will come [to the responsible bureau] when summoned.

**Verso side**

[Qi Mo] verifies [the vouch] by his seal. Scribe Guo...

**2572A (2010CWJ1③:283-20A)**

左倉曹史薛憲詣曹願保任  守史張普不逃亡徵召可得以床(癸)

**Recto side**

Scribe of the Bureau of the Left Granary, Xue Xi, comes to the Bureau and wishes to vouch for  Probationary Scribe Zhang Pu and guarantee that he will not abscond and will come [to the responsible bureau] when summoned. [Xue Xi]

**2572B (2010CWJ1③:283-20B)**

印為信

**Verso side**

verifies [the vouch] by his seal.

These two documents afford us with many new insights into the practice of sealing, as well as the vouching process. First, although the seal clays were already lost or decayed when they were discovered in the storage pit, the shape of the existing clay cases indicate that they were made in a rectangular shape. The seals that Qi Mo and Xue Xi impressed on the clay cases were possibly the so-called ‘half-sized seals’ or their private seals.<sup>41</sup> This would correlate with the official seal system, as explained above, as the salary grade of scribes (*shi* 史) serving in the county was normally below 100 bushels; both Qi Mo and Xue Xi were not entitled to hold a full size seal.

<sup>41</sup> The surface area of the seal clay cases on these two documents is even smaller than a 5-*fen* seal based on the photos provided in *JD*. Recent research indicates that there was a type of private seals whose script was composed of an official title and a name. The official title of the seal-holder inscribed on the seal serves the purpose of informing the viewer of his official status, a desirable quality in a guarantor from the perspective of the government. For this type of seal, see: Zhao 2012, 78–80; Du 2019.

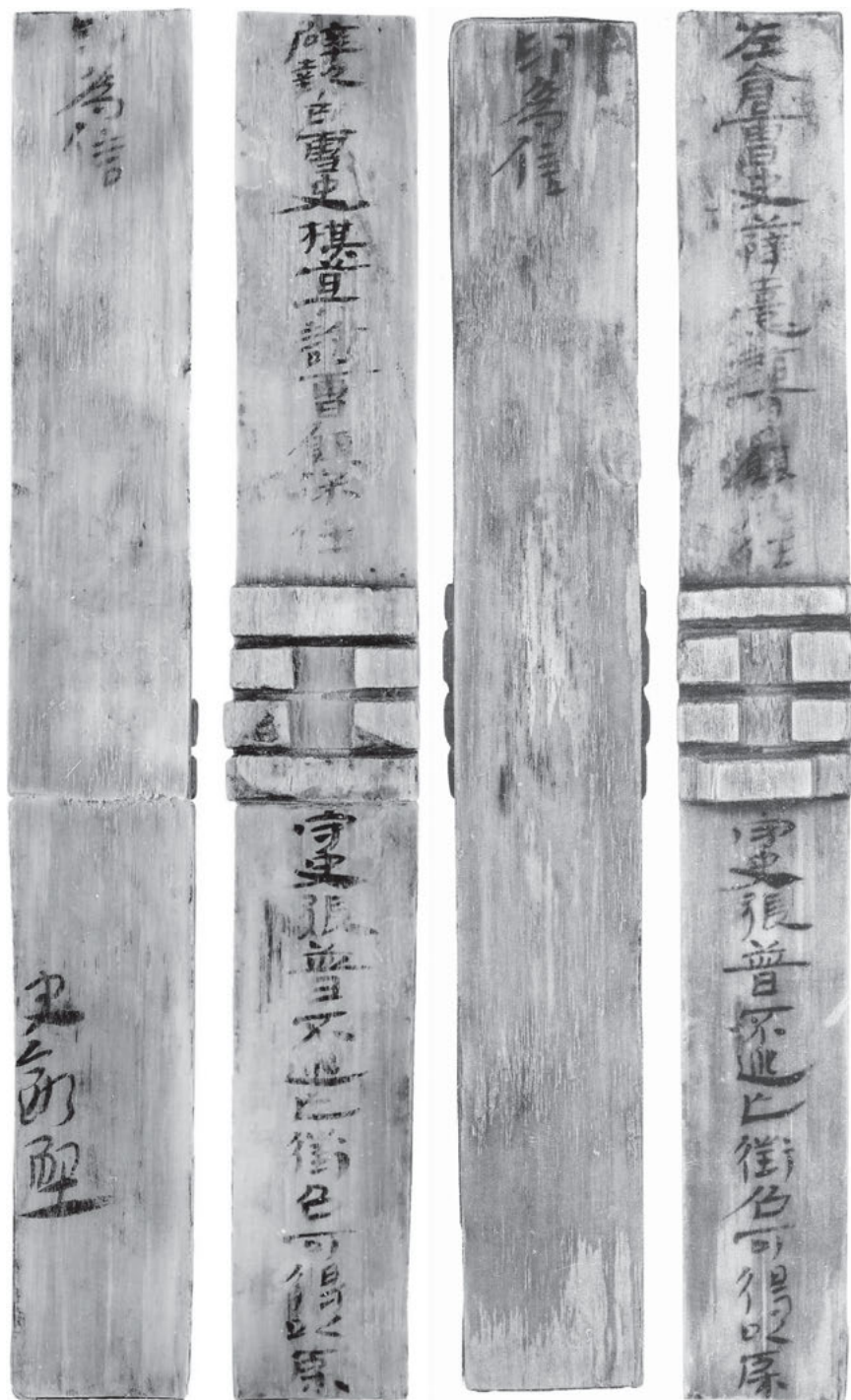


Fig. 4: Wuyiguangchang nos. 526+534 verso, 526+534 recto, 2572 verso and 2572 recto (left to right).

Second, in comparison to the first pair of the documents, the term *shoushu* (hand-writing) was replaced by the phrase *yi qi yin wei xin* 以床(癸)印為信 (to verify by one's seal). As outlined in the previous section, the use of a seal in this context was not the only means to vouch for others; one could also vouch for others by writing his own name. The advantage of using seals was that the seal-holder could reproduce identical script without being able to write.<sup>42</sup> However, for Qi Mo and Xue Xi the choice of using seals instead of writing their own names was, apparently, not due to the lack of writing ability, as writing was one of the everyday tasks of the scribes.<sup>43</sup> I would suggest that these examples show us that the guarantors enjoyed a certain degree of freedom in choosing to write or to seal in the vouching process.

Third, Enno Giele and Hsing I-tien have both touched on the issue of sealing versus writing based on the Juyan materials, but in a quite different context.<sup>44</sup> The above two pairs of Wuyiguangchang documents allow us to examine this issue further. Two Juyan documents could serve as excellent comparable materials (Fig. 5):

#### 282.9A

(Line 1) 初元四年正月壬子箕山 (blank) 隧長明敢言之□

(Line 2) 趙子回錢三百唯官 (blank) 以二月奉錢三□

On the Renzi day, the first month of the fourth year of Chuyuan [of Emperor Yuan (45 BCE)], Squad Officer Ming ventures to state...[owed] Zhao Zihui 300 coins. [I] beg the [Jiaqu] Company to use my salary of the second month, 3[00 coins]...

#### 282.9B

以=付鄉男子莫以印為 (Seal clay) 信敢言之□<sup>45</sup>

... be given to adult male Mo of [the same] District. (Seal clay) [Ming] verifies by his seal. [I] venture to state ...

#### 37.44

□□□□□□□□以自書為信

... verify by his self-writing

It is stated in no. 282.9 that Officer (*suizhang* 隧長) Ming 明 of Jishan 箕山 Squad owed Zhao Zihui 趙子回 300 coins and he confirmed, by impressing his seal, that he would use his salary in the second month of the same year to clear his debt. On the verso side of this document, the sealing clay was still attached to the tablet when it was found from the A8 site, which had been the office of Jiaqu company 甲渠候官, a military unit on the Han north-western frontier whose bureaucratic status was

<sup>42</sup> For the use of seals in medieval Europe, see: Clanchy 2013, 309–318.

<sup>43</sup> See: Ma 2017, 297–333.

<sup>44</sup> Giele 2005, 353–361; Hsing 2021b, 143–147.

<sup>45</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all the transcriptions of the Juyan materials excavated in the 1930s follow: *Juyan Han jian* 2014–2017. For those excavated in the 1970s, I follow the transcriptions from: *Juyan xin jian jishi* 2016.



Fig. 5: Juyan nos. 282.9 verso, 282.9 recto and 37.44 (from left to right).

equivalent to the county in the interior region of the empire. As stated in the document, Ming impressed his seal in the clay directly on the document as a verification of his promise to Zhao Zihui. The Jiaqu company was the unit to pay Ming's monthly salary, which explains why Ming submitted this verification document to the office of the company where it was finally kept.<sup>46</sup> Due to the damage of the slip, however, it is not clear why Ming would ask the office to give the money to Mo 莫 rather than his creditor, Zhao Zihui.<sup>47</sup>

Of particular importance here is that the seal clay was impressed directly on the document without a case. The writer of this document appeared to be quite conscious of leaving space for the impression of the seal clay. As there was no seal case for holding the clay, a notch was made on one side for the tying of cord in order to prevent the clay from falling off the slip (Fig. 5). The clay here was clearly not for the purpose of securing the document but rather for bearing the script of Ming's seal as verification. The Wuyiguangchang research team has identified nos. 526+534 and 2572 as sealing envelopes or covers (*fengjian*), mainly due to the existence of the seal cases. Drawing insights from Juyan wooden slip no. 282.9, it is quite clear that the real function of sealing in these cases was not to secure the document but rather to authenticate it. As such, I would suggest that this type of verification documents could be considered as a "self-contained slip" or "single slip" (*tandoku kan* 单独简), a term coined by Japanese scholars to refer to a slip or tablet that contains a complete or full document.<sup>48</sup>

Despite its fragmentary nature, Juyan slip no. 3744 indicates that another means for verifying oneself was to use his own handwriting (*zishu* 自書). The handwriting of this slip also appears to be more personalised. The same term *zishu* can also be seen in a silk letter excavated from Xuanquanzhi, which indicates that the section that starts with such a term was written by the sender.<sup>49</sup> The Wuyiguangchang and Juyan examples presented above attest to the fact that individuals would encounter the problem of choosing to write or to seal on different occasions in the early Chinese administration.

Finally, the material features of these two Wuyiguangchang documents—including the size,<sup>50</sup> layout and handwriting—appear to be highly standardised. They must

<sup>46</sup> See: Li/Liu 1999, 242.

<sup>47</sup> An alternative explanation could be that the debtor in this case was Zhao Zihui and the creditor was Mo. Ming was the official who informed the Jiaqu company about this case. Yet, such an explanation is quite unlikely as there are at least two more similar cases excavated in the 1970s, indicating that the officials who submitted the verification was usually the debtors. See: Juyan slip nos. EPT52: 88 and EPT51:225.

<sup>48</sup> For such an exposition of the concept, see: Sumiya 2012.

<sup>49</sup> Hu/Zhang 2001, 191, n. 23; Giele 2015, 432.

<sup>50</sup> According to the appendix on the size of Wuyiguangchang manuscripts in *JD*, no. 526+534 is recovered from two fragments, one is 13 cm long and 2.9 cm wide and the other is 9.9 cm long and 3 cm wide. Put together, the size would be approximately 22.9 cm long and 2.9 or 3 cm wide. No. 2572 is 23 cm long and 3.1 cm wide. The size of the two documents is almost the same and is very similar to the first pair of examples (nos. 441 and 1120) examined in the previous section.

be the intended result of someone's careful handling. The "Scribe Guo" 史郭 who appears on the verso side of no. 526+534 was very possibly the person who handled these two documents. As in the case of Assistant Wang Shi on the verso side of nos. 441 and 1120, "Scribe Guo" was also followed by the same untranscribed character (Fig. 6).



**Fig. 6:** The untranscribed character appearing on the verso side of Wuyiguangchang nos. 441, 1120 and 526+534 (from left to right).

The research team reads it tentatively as *ye* 野 (wild, field or the outskirts), but both its literal meaning(s) and shape do not fit the one appearing in these three documents. Li Hongcai 李洪財 proposes that it could be read as *jie* 解, referring to the act of opening a sealed document. Li's proposal is based on the understanding that no. 526+534 is a sealing cover or envelop as suggested by the research team.<sup>51</sup> As demonstrated above, drawing inspiration from the Juyan materials, no. 526+534 could be considered as a complete or full document. The seal was to authenticate the document rather than to secure it. Such an explanation could not apply to nos. 441 and 1120, since they were part of a "multi-text manuscript".<sup>52</sup> Although there is still no satisfactory transcription of this character, judging from the context in which it appears, it should refer to the process of handling or supervising these vouches. Both Wang Shi and Guo left their names with such a character to indicate their accountability in the process.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Li 2018.

<sup>52</sup> I adopt the term 'multi-text manuscript' from Imre Galambos when referring to a manuscript composed of more than one document or text: Galambos 2020. Based on his research on the manuscripts discovered in Dunhuang indicates that, "[i]n addition to the one-text-per-one-manuscript model, there are also many physically homogeneous manuscripts which include discrete texts written in succession, sometimes in the same hand, but not necessarily so": *Ibid.*, 23. Both nos. 441 and 1120 could be seen as a separate text, or in the Japanese scholars' term, *tandoku kan*. They were tied together mainly for the convenience of filing. Another excellent example of the multi-text manuscript in early imperial China are three tablets excavated at Liye 里耶, Hunan province in 2002. I argue that they were tied in accordion form for the purpose of filing: Ma 2020b.

<sup>53</sup> A similar term *shou* 手 placed after a personal name in the Liye materials was used to indicate one's accountability of handling a document: Ma 2017, 322–332.



## Conclusion

This article has examined two pairs of Wuyiguangchang documents to discuss the issue of writing versus sealing in the early Chinese administration. My discussion reveals that individuals in early imperial China would have to choose to write or to seal when they verified their identity or vouched for others, but the decision was not necessarily due to the lack of writing ability. The two pairs of examples examined in this article show that the administrative specialists, scribes and assistants,<sup>54</sup> could have chosen to write or to seal when serving as guarantors. These cases show that individuals had enjoyed a certain degree of freedom in choosing to write or to seal in early Chinese administration.

Furthermore, among the Wuyiguangchang materials published so far, there are two other similar cases in which an adult male named Huang Jing 黄京 and a Constable of Du 都 police station named Li Zong 李宗 used sealing to vouch for others. The two documents specifically mention that Huang Jing and Li Zong arrived at the offices of the county or the responsible bureau “without being summoned” (*buzhao* 不召),<sup>55</sup> which implies that in most cases the guarantors would only come to the office when summoned. It is highly possible that there will be more evidence regarding the guarantee system and the vouching process when the Wuyiguangchang materials are made fully public.

Finally, building on the evidence excavated from the Juyan site, it is apparent that sealing as a way of verification was not less uncommon than writing one’s own name in early Chinese administration. One could employ sealing to verify a promise to use his salary to clear his debt, as seen in the Juyan materials. Considering the writing produced by the act of impressing an inscribed seal on clay, sealing should be regarded as a literacy practice, which correlates with my previous suggestion that literacy practices in early Chinese administrative contexts should not be understood to refer only to the act of using a brush to apply ink on a writing material.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> For their predecessors during the Qin and early Western Han: Ma 2017, 297–333.

<sup>55</sup> See: nos. 620 (2010CWJ1③:261-106) and 1274 (2010CWJ1③:265-20).

<sup>56</sup> Other practices include using a writing knife (*shudao* 書刀) to carve various shaped notches on a pair of tallies (*quan* 券) to transmit numerical information that corresponds with the written content of the tallies: Ma 2017, 322–332.

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