

simplified as the latter. Therefore, the composition of 疥 does not mean that scrapie was known in ancient China. Of course, this analysis does not exclude the possibility that ancient Chinese observed scrapie.

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Disease but No Sheep

IN HIS LETTER "SCRAPIE IN ANCIENT CHINA?" (5 Aug. 2005, p. 874), R. B. Wickner analyzes the orthographic features of several Chinese characters and concludes that scrapie, the transmissible spongiform encephalopathy found in sheep, may have existed more than 2000 years ago. Unfortunately, Wickner's analyses ignore the fact that Chinese characters evolve, not only in form, but also in meaning. The same character may refer to totally different things across time and geographical location. Such is the case for Wickner's crucial evidence, the character 疥 for "itchy," which he interprets as consisting of components for "disease" and

"sheep" and as having the meaning "pruritis." According to the ancient dictionary compiled by the Later Han scholar Xu Shen (who lived roughly between 54 and 149 A.D.), the original meaning of the character 疥 was "head injury" or "disease" (1). Xu wrote that 羊, the sheep component of the character, simply indicated the method of pronunciation and was unrelated to the meaning of the word sheep.

Wickner's analyses of other characters are similarly flawed. For example, 包, the character for "packet," was originally used to mean "pregnancy" (2) and 養, the character for nutrition, was originally used to mean "support" (the sheep component again refers to the sound of the character). In fact, this character, 養, and not 羊 for "sheep" (as Wickner proposed), was part of the character 癢 for "itchy" just 50 years ago, before the traditional forms of Chinese characters were simplified in mainland China as 疥 (the traditional form 癢 is still widely used in Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Taiwan). The same holds true for 癩, whose traditional form was 癩, which combined the sound component 疑 "doubt" (rather than 知 as in Wickner's letter) with the meaning component 疒 that indicates disease. Finally, the character 癩 does not exist in Chinese; the true character for "itchy" is 癢, which uses 叉 ("fingernails" or "toenails") and not 又 ("hand").

All of these examples contain the so-called phonograms that emerged during the Han Dynasty (206 B.C. to 220 A.D.)—characters that have a component indicating the sound and one indicating the meaning. Such phonograms make up nearly 90% of all Chinese characters used today (3). Wickner mistakenly interprets these phonograms as ideograms (characters that are picture-like and symbolize objects and ideas), which were popular before the Han Dynasty but are uncommon today (4).

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