

Redebate on the Value of Chinese Characters

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In order to deepen our rational understanding of Chinese characters, it is necessary to reexamine the value of it today. The reason why Chinese characters can keep vital is that it fits the unique thinking mode and aesthetic standards of the Han People. In the meantime, it intervenes in Chinese ontology by improving the resolution ratio of information trans, and objectively performs the function of the fourth element of language.

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Today, we are in a transitional period of further discussion, extensive integration and rediscovering. It is rather outdated to adhere to a single mode of thinking and arbitrarily predicate the merits and demerits of ethnic culture. Wordage is the symbol of civilization and an important carrier of ethnic culture. When the debates in the past tend to be relatively quiet, it is obviously necessary to reexamine the value of Chinese characters.

I. Overview of Past Discussions

It was expounded in *A Brief Exposition on Culturology of Chinese Characters* written by He Jiuying, Hu Shuangbao and Zhang Meng, “The relationship between Chinese characters and Chinese culture is an old and fashionable topic. There are correct understandings, meanwhile, there are fallacies arising from specific cultural systems and sentimental colors arising from different cultural mind-sets, also, there are some propositions to be demonstrated in the development. If we investigate essentially the process of this recognition, it is not difficult to find that the cognitions about culture of Chinese characters from ancient times to the present can obviously be divided into three different stages: The stage of worship, the stage of negation and the stage of multidimensional self-examination” (He, , Hu, , & Zhang, 1990, p. 92). Chen Guozhi (2005) directly inherited the cognition of this three-stages and expounded it in more detail. I have to say that they summed it up well.

In the long history of china over three thousand years, the adoration on Chinese characters has been flourishing. Just like Confucius, whether the successors first called him “The King of Su” or different dynasties constantly canonized him as “The King of Wenxuan”, “The greatest sage and teacher”, there was no fundamental change of affirming Confucius in orthodox culture. Some studies focus more on the Chinese characters themselves, as *Huai Nan Zi-Ben Jing Xun* expressed, “Gods and devils are shocked at the miracle of human mastery of written word, they cry woefully with intense fear”. It is obviously a literal understanding, in reality,

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“Startle the universe and move the gods” is enough. As an important event in history, our ancestors still deeply felt the significance of Chinese characters, although they could not evaluate it as scientifically as we do today. Neither crying with sorrow nor crying with joy is the result of a single sadness and fear. This is apparently contrary to the allusion of “Berberta” in *Bible*: The westerners adored language, they firmly believed language was with God, God granted mankind language, however, with the help of language, people cooperated to build a Babel, God was afraid that he could not continue to dominate mankind, so he polarized human language. We traditionally adore Chinese characters and depreciate language. It can not help saying that the theory of prophecy prevailing in the Han Dynasty embodies the obvious worship of Chinese characters, although it is full of superstition and mystery. As it was recorded in *Chun Qiu Wei-Yan Kong Tu*, “Once the prophetic characters appear, they will be mastered by a man named Liu Ji, his constellatory is to the north of star of Zhen, he will be venerated by people all over the world.” *The History of the Late Han Dynasty·Biographic Sketches of Emperor Guangwu Section I* recorded the congratulatory text of emperor Guangwu when he ascended the throne, “Liu Xiu will send troops to hunt down those who are morally corrupt, he is of high moral character and will be emperor.” Likewise, the rigorous philology of Han Dynasty held the same view. *Huai Nan Zi·Tai Zu Xun* recorded, “Cang Jie created characters to rule officials and deal with various daily affairs. So that, the fool would forget things no more, and the wise would be able to record events long ago.” *Preface to Text Notes and Word Explanations* written by Xu Shen referred to, “Character is the foundation of Confucian classics and history, and it is also the primary element of dynastic rule, it is used by predecessors to record experiences and pass them on to descendants, and it is used by descendants to understand ancient history”. This statement of Xu Shen seems plain but profound, that is, the current view that the emergence of characters breaks the boundaries of time and space is merely a reflection of it. Many scholars in the Han Dynasty, such as Ma Rong, He Xiu and Zheng Xuan, they all regarded characters as the basis of scripture. The view that Chinese characters are sacred and one painting is no more than an unquestionable moral truth was deeply rooted in people’s concepts in that era. The *Shih Chi·Biography of Wan Shi* stated, “Shi Jian was in charge of palace guards, one day, he wrote a memorial to the throne, when the paper was approved, he read it again, then he found that he had misspelled the character of horse, worrying about being excuted, he was terrified”. It also reflects people’s widespread reverence for Chinese characters, although it contains the elements of imperial power and majesty. As it was stated in *Embellishments on the heart of Literature·How to use words in writing*, “Government officials and ordinary people would be impeached if they made a mistake in writing a memorial to the throne. Therefore, Shi Jian was terrified when he had misspelled the character of horse in the memorial, which was related to the emphasis on Chinese characters at that time”.

Although the academic attitude of the Song Dynasty was different from that of the Han Dynasty, its reverence for Chinese characters remained unchanged. It was stated in the *Preface to Interpretations of Xi Ning for Chinese Characters* written by Wang Anshi, “Chinese characters root in nature and are beyond human ability”. Dai Zhen said in the *Preface to Deconstruction of the Ancient Sutras*, “Characters lead to language, and language leads to the minds of ancient sages”. They all regarded Chinese character as an extraordinary creation, through which they could be aware of the meaning of language and thus communicated with ancient sages. This idea was also deeply rooted in the folk. Being literate was the spiritual pursuit of ordinary people. The homes of studying part-time and doing farm work part-time meant to create ideal environments for their own families.

More common people lacking necessary knowledge of Chinese characters placed hopes on its magic function. If a child cried incessantly at night, in the absence of medical supplies, someone would write a note, "My Lord, my Lord, I have a child who cries incessantly at night, I beg the gentleman passing by to read it three times, so that the child can sleep until dawn". In terms of geomantic omen, people always wrote such Chinese characters as "Tai Shan Shi Gan Dang", and put them in unlucky abodes to ward off evil spirits.

Chinese characters have become gradually an inseparable complex of the Chinese nation. For instance, a style of writing in which strokes are reduced to avoid taboo with venerable people, it was stated in the second chapter of *A Dream in Red Mansions*, "YuCun claps and laughs, 'Yes! The girl named Dai Yu is my student, he always pronounces 'Min' as 'Mi', and also takes a stroke or two off when he writes 'Min', I am always confused about it, but, I know it now.'". Here is another example, in the past, people used to put banners saying "Respect and Cherish a Piece of Paper with Writing on it" in certain places. These are also the reflections of this cultural psychology.

In modern times, this long-standing national culture is severely impacted when western learning penetrates eastward. It has to be said that the introduction of advanced science and technology has also brought about great changes in the original cognitions of the Chinese people. Some people advocated complete westernization in the past, which naturally formed a trend of thought to negate Chinese characters. It is understandable that it is difficult for people to get the balance right between sudden changes and original ideology in a moment, however, there is no need to emotionally repudiate.

Since the reform and opening-up, the ideologies of people have been prodigiously emancipated. The discussion on this topic has gradually calmed down with the change of the National Committee for Reforming Chinese Characters into the National Language Affairs Committee. It is still too early to say that everyone has reached a rational state of cognition and can form a relatively consistent scientific opinions, although people with different views are not as hostile as before. Even scholars who affirm the value of Chinese characters have some difficulties in elaborating practical problems. For example, why have Chinese been using Chinese characters? Mr Guo Jinfu gave a multi-faceted answer to it in his opus of *Chinese and Chinese Traditional Culture*: (1) Chinese characters are based on a wide range of national cultural psychology; (2) The history of China has never given Chinese characters an opportunity to transform into phonography; (3) Chinese dialects differ from each other, especially in pronunciation, which provides an important foundation of the existence of Chinese characters; (4) The structure and cultural connotation of Chinese characters also play important roles. The views of Mr. Guo Jinfu are very comprehensive and enlightening, but in our opinion, it seems that the external elements of language were paid more attentions, while the factors of language ontology were not pursued, or underemphasized, to say the least. We expect to learn from Mr. Guo, in the meantime, provide some supplements as appropriate, and acquire colleagues' indoctrination.

II. Chinese Culture and Chinese Characters

How are culture and characters related? We will not discuss these concepts here, but one thing is certain: they are surely corresponding words in a hypernym-hyponym relationship. Culture constitutes the dominant spirit of a specific nation, and characters are concrete manifestations of a specific culture. They can be reference for each other, but dominant spirit determines the concrete manifestations of culture under certain

circumstances. For example, according to the basic principles of linguistics, character is roughly categorized into “picture writing”, “ideographic writing” and “phonetic writing”, evolving in sequence. Besides, He Jiuying et al. classified character in another way:

Picture writing → Logographic writing → Lexigraphy → Syllabic language → grapheme → Phonemic language.

No matter how it is classified, Chinese characters are unique characters today for a direct association between form and meaning, which is an undeniable attribute. Why can it be the case? This is determined by thinking mode, that is, the core of the nation’s cultural spirit. Let’s look at statements in *I Ching-Xi Ci Section I*.

Confucius said, “Characters can not fully represent speech, and neither can speech fully express ideas.” Then, is it impossible to understand ideas of sages? Confucius said, “The sage created images to fully express his ideas, set forth hexagrams to tell the truth and falsehood, added appendixes to fully explain what he wanted to say, changed flexibly to achieve all benefits, encouraged people to give play to the most magical efficiency.”

What are “images”? There were a fair amount of discussions in Wei-Jin metaphysics, with no need of elaboration. In modern Chinese, they actually are “a systematic symbol system and manifestation mode, both unseparated from behavioral representations of things”. “The systematic symbol system unseparated from behavioral representations of things” is Chinese character, and “manifestation mode unseparated from behavioral representations of things” refers to Chinese grammar. In fact, the former was expounded in *I Ching-Xi Ci*.

The sage observed the subtle operation of the universe, and imitated the appearances of specific things to properly symbolize their meanings, which were known as images.

In the remote ages, when Bao Xi (also known as Fu Xi) began to rule all tribes, he observed celestial phenomena and various laws on the earth, tracked the traces of birds and beasts, and found their adaptations to surroundings. He applied his own experiences nearby and observations of various things in the distance in devising the Eight Trigrams to reveal messages from gods and imitate situations of myriads of things.

How did Chinese characters come into being? They were created by imitating the appearances of things and properly symbolizing their meanings. In the words of Confucius, only in this way could they fully express meanings and emotions. At this point, we clearly understand Xu Shen’s descriptions in *Preface to Text Notes and Word Explanations*, “At the beginning of creating characters, Cang Jie drew shapes of things according to their categories, so named them ‘Wen’. Then fused pictograms with phonograms, named them “Zi”. Therefore, “Wen” means original pictogram; “Zi” is just like offspring of pictogram”.

Chinese is also expressed in this way. For example, sentences in Confucius’ *Spring and Autumn Annals* read, Five aerolites fell in the State of Song, and six aquatic birds flew backwards over the capital of the State of Song. Dong Zhongshu explained, “All are continued in chronological order.”

Now, there is a consensus in the global field of linguistics: Chinese is a language with words arranged in chronological order, reflecting iconicity; in comparison, words in languages like English are arranged following the principle of focus, showing logicity. The former is dominated by thinking in images, while the latter is controlled by logical thinking. Evidently, image-based thinking is integrally reflected in Chinese characters.

By extension, major patterns such as the “Chinese dragon” totem and Taiji-diagram of Yin-Yang are models of image-based thinking. This is closely related to holistic thinking, golden mean thinking of keeping an ideal moderate position, flexible thinking of making a change when all obsolete means are exhausted to get

through and achieve sustainability, and subjective thinking of placing humanistic care at the core. This is a kind of thinking that even Hegel as a great master of dialectics cannot attain. How do we know it? As everyone knows, Hegel showed an obvious contempt for Confucius and held that Confucianism was just tactful moral sermon and Confucius was no more than a sophist who was devoid of philosophical thinking. However, Hegel's interpretations of many phenomena were far less reasoned, extensive and profound than those given by Confucius. As mentioned above, Confucius presented that language could express human thoughts but hardly achieve perfection, and an effective way to an ideal realm was "creating images". By contrast, Hegel could only reach the superficial level of thinking that language could not convey human thoughts, while he argued that beauty was "sensuous form of human self-understanding and self-expression". Therefore, despite he was born over 2,000 years later than Confucius, his ideological level was not comparable to that of Confucius. In terms of their attitudes towards understanding and evaluating Chinese characters, Hegel presented in *The Philosophy of History*, "Chinese character is quite imperfect and a large obstacle to scientific development" (Hegel, 2006, p. 177.). In contrast, "Confucius was fond of reading *I Ching* in his later years, and he annotated *Tuan Ci*, *Xi Ci*, *Shuo Gua*, and *Wen Yan*. He read *I Ching* so frequently that ropes binding the book were broken several times. He said, 'I would be able to grasp both form and content of *I Ching*, if gave me another few years'" (*Shih Chi Biography of Confucius*). As stated above, this well reflects Confucius' high advocacy for such systematic symbol systems as diagrams and Chinese characters in theory. Thus, it can be seen that Hegel failed to fully understand the true value and effect of "sensuous form", although he highly endorsed it; and he even defined it at the level of aesthetics, at which Confucius would sneer if he could know it after death.

Naturally, deep down inside the traditional cultural concepts, the ideographic attribute of characters is considered not as a backward and outdated form of expression, but the only means of conveying emotions and meanings. Abstracting images from lines, incorporating meanings in forms and creating scenarios with graphs, people believe they can represent three-dimensional objects by virtue of planar symbolic signs, and embody infinite concepts in their minds; people do not realize its limitations in the effect of recording language, but regard it as the only choice and even further develop it into a unique calligraphy on its basis. In the face of such a great creation, how can people doubt its value and reinvent it? It is not hard to imagine that the reform of Chinese characters is out of the question for people living on this land with such long-standing profound culture, they who would not even have any idea about it if no foreign culture intervened.

III. Chinese and Chinese Characters

Chinese and Chinese characters constitute a integral symbol system. This can also be explained as: whether something changes or not is determined by its internal contradictions. If its internal elements are compatible and coordinated, they will meet the needs of external functions; if out of harmony, by contrast, they will have to resort to other means. Based on the two threshold domain processing methods of cybernetics, it relies on either self-organizing or self-stabilizing control. By self-organizing control, it is entire subversion, which means a radical reform in nature for a writing system. By self-stabilizing control, it is minor adjustment inside or the addition of other elements, to change its original inharmonious state.

This corresponds to the situation of Chinese. For example, in terms of syllabic forms of words, ancient Chinese is mainly monosyllabic, while modern Chinese is dominated by disyllables. Why has it changed in this

way? It is because early form of Chinese could not well adapt to the need of signification. Just as Lu Xun argued in *Ci Sheng or Bi Sheng*, “Compared with the vernacular, classical Chinese indeed consists of fewer characters, but conveys more ambiguous meanings”. Similar phenomena are too numerous to mention, even confusing people at that time. The expressions such as “Yellow Emperor with four faces”, “Kui with one leg” and “Dig a man out of a well” they all became anecdotes spread widely later. For this reason, in debates at that time, such ambiguities were frequently used for disguised replacement of concepts. So is Zhuang Zi’s record about “The happiness of fish”. The situation is effectively rectified by changing monosyllables into disyllables.

Of course, the above point touches on only one of the several factors. Whether ancient Chinese or modern Chinese, it is just the question whether monosyllable is dominant or disyllable is dominant, rather than an absolute opposition between the two. Is there no problem in modern Chinese? In common sense, characters are not organic elements of language, so they don’t have to be taken into consideration as an indispensable form of language. However, as the phonetic system of modern Mandarin is relatively simple, with 21 initial consonants, 39 finals and 4 tones, which compose syllables according to certain rules of composition. The problem lies in that the three items cannot be fully matched, so only about 1,100 syllables can be identified in reality. Language is a symbol system and a tool for exchanging ideas, and difficulty in learning and using it tends to be negatively related to the resolution ratio of information transfer. It should be admitted that the number of these basic units of signification results in a low resolution ratio. Those who advocated the alphabetization of Chinese characters in the past argued that Mandarin had to be popularized to achieve this goal, by uniformity of pronunciations and characters, and by consistency of written and spoken Chinese, alphabetization would naturally succeed. In fact, this is a naive idea. Why? The key problem is that the phonetic system is too simple, with low resolution ratio. In view of this, Zhao Yuanren once wrote a satirical article titled *Shí Shì Shí Shī Shǐ*:

Shí shì shī shì shī shì, shì shǐ, shì shí shí shǐ. Shì shí shí shì shì shǐ. Shí shí, shì shí shī shì shì. Shì shí shī shì shì shì. Shì shì shí shǐ, shì shǐ shì, shǐ shì shí shǐ shì shì. Shì shí shí shí shǐ shǐ, shì shí shì. Shí shì shǐ, shì shì shì. Shì shǐ shí shí shǐ shǐ. Shí shí, shǐ shí shí shǐ shǐ, shí shì shí shí shǐ shǐ.

A Story of Shi’s Eating Lions: A poet named Shi living in a stone house liked eating lions and swore that he would eat ten lions. He often went to see lions in the marketplace. At ten o’clock, ten lions were sent to the marketplace, when he arrived there. He saw the ten lions and shot them dead with arrows. He carried the corpses of the ten lions back to his stone house. The stone house was wet, so he wiped it up. Then he started tasting the ten lions. When he ate them, he found they were actually ten stone lions.

Someone intentionally posted the strange passage written in the 1930s on the Internet, making it go viral again. As it “cannot be read out but comprehended only in written form”, the X-generation addicted in such a tool for communication feel “totally dumbfounded”, “their tongues get cramps”, “shocked” and “embarrassed”, while exclaiming heartily “How super powerful Chinese characters are!” If seen from another perspective, they give us a great inspiration that it was mainly because of the monosyllabism and low resolution ratio of the phonetic system that Chinese characters were not transformed into phonetic writing like Egyptian hieroglyphics and Babylonian cuneiforms. Character, as a tool system for recording language, is originally not an element of language, but play a role in improving resolution ratio. There is no need of tracing it far back, even a commonly seen daily chat will be an example.

May I have your family name, please?

You can call me Zhāng.
Excuse me, which one is it?
Well, it consists of gōng and cháng.

It is because of this characteristic of the Chinese phonetic system that the use of Chinese characters becomes an effective way to improve the resolution ratio of Chinese. Furthermore, Chinese characters have been maintaining a role of transcending dialects, and playing an irreplaceable role in inheriting cultures of Han People. In this sense, they make up for defects in the phonetic system, and have directly become an explicit form of Chinese.

The three elements of language, recognized by western linguistic theories, seemingly, fails to exemplify modern Chinese today. According to statistics, the five volumes of *Selected Works of Mao Zedong* have about 3,150 characters; Sun Yat-sen's *The Three People's Principles* uses 2,134 characters; Lao She's *Rickshaw Boy* uses 2,413 characters. Arrangement of scientific quantification and gradual improvement are also strengthened in the teaching of characters in primary and secondary schools. Primary students will acquire about 2,500 characters upon graduation, when they can read by and large, and then with another 1,000 characters learned in secondary school, they will be fully capable of reading common newspapers, periodicals and books written in Chinese. Therefore, the State Language Committee of the PRC and the State Education Committee of the PRC issued the *List of Commonly Used Characters in Modern Chinese* in 1988, which contains 3,500 characters in total, including 2,500 most frequently used characters and 1,000 more frequently used characters. These 3,500 characters are generally enough for one to read ordinary books, newspapers and periodicals written in Chinese. If the number is compared to that of syllables in Mandarin, the ratio is roughly 3:1. Disyllables offset the gap in the ratio, but still cannot thoroughly eliminate the phenomena of absolute homonyms, such as “qizhong” and “youxiang” etc. It is also worth noting that Mandarin can be said to be dominated by disyllables mainly in terms of written form, while its oral form is still mainly composed of monosyllable. It is less effective to distinguish the four tones and adjacent finals in Mandarin. For this reason, “107” is pronounced as “yao dong guai” during communications in some special fields, and interviews on TV are mostly matched with subtitles in sync, thus ensuring the fidelity of information transfer as far as possible.

“The Scheme for the Chinese Phonetic Alphabet” was originally named “Scheme for Alphabetization of Chinese”. Someone once tried to keep a diary according to the phonetic regulations of the scheme, but it was said that at the end, the writer turned to the early works and found it difficult to read. Compared with other languages, it is very popular to abbreviate the first letter of multiple words to a new word, but the effect is not ideal. For instance, these four letters “HNSD” are printed on the back of the uniform of students from Henan Normal University. Evidently, such abbreviation cannot correspond to the actual name of work unit.

How can I put it? Our language seems unified and indivisible: providing one element with convenience may bring negative effects on other elements. Just like the simplified Chinese characters advocated in the past, it is indeed much easier for reading and writing after simplification, however, the resolution ratio between Chinese characters is also reduced. To improve the speed of transmission, but set a limit on the effect of transmission. The same is the relationship between Chinese and Chinese characters: The phonetic system is simplified, and in order to maintain fidelity, Chinese characters have to be used as a tool. The three elements of language came from the theories of western linguistics. If we look at Chinese objectively, Chinese characters essentially play the role of

the fourth element of language: As a form of Chinese, it conveys meaning and emotion together with pronunciation. Because of this, the current Chinese phonetic system is impossible to be alphabetized on this basis.

III. Epilogue

The real utility of language is expression. In which the main contradiction is the relationship between form and meaning. Phonetic writing is a pure symbol, there is no connection between pronunciation and meaning. Ideographic writing is different, you do not have to know the pronunciation of a word, but you can guess the meaning based on the font. That is why, the advantage of Chinese characters is particularly evident when semantics is prevalent nowadays: We can not only distinguish the meaning according to the font, but also interpret Chinese characters according to the context. In phonetic writing, it is difficult for the former to trace the origin, and Chinese characters, being for “living fossils”, provide us with great conveniences. As early as 500BC, linguists in ancient India debated whether words themselves had meanings, some endorsed the former, being called “Faction of lexical item”, and some endorsed the latter, believing that words had meanings only in the context. Chinese characters seem to hold water on both counts. For this reason, we owe a special debt of gratitude to ancient literal scholars especially Xu Shen, whose *Text Notes and Word Explanations* plays an enlightening and exemplary role in helping people distinguish meaning according to font, each of us have to be appreciative.

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