Exploring the Secret of the Ancient Chinese Character's Development: A Hindsight After Reading *The Development of Ancient Chinese Character*

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Abstract

With regard to analyzing the form of the ancient Chinese character, *The Development of Ancient Chinese Character* puts forward dynamic analysis and static analysis. It makes attempt to study the history of ancient Chinese character from both diachronic and synchronic perspectives, and combine the dynamic analysis of the character's form with the static analysis. Besides, according to *The Development of Ancient Chinese Character,* "the change of Chinese character's form into lines", "symbolization", and "uniformity" are the general direction that the form of ancient Chinese character develops towards. Besides, the development of ancient Chinese character also shows the features of the times. Moreover, the book compares the structures of the characters in the periods from the Shang dynasty to Qin dynasty, revealing the formation mode of ancient Chinese character which is in a dynamic transformation. Furthermore, the usage of ancient Chinese character is also included in the book, which encompasses many aspects, such as the total number of the different characters in different periods, the frequency of characters, commonly-used characters and rarely-used characters, and so on. Through detailed numbers, the book makes its argumentation convincing and vivid. In addition, the book is also filled with creative ideas in the interpretation of individual characters and in the establishment of new theories.

Key words: The development of ancient Chinese character; Textual criticism and explanation; Structure; Theory establishment

INTRODUCTION

In April, 2014, *The Development of Ancient Chinese Character*" (hereinafter referred to as "*The Development*") written by Mr. Huang Dekuan and other scholars was published by the Chinese Publishing House, which is a stage achievement of the National Social Science Fund project of "A Study on the Theories of Chinese Character and on the History of Chinese Character's Development". It is also a stage achievement of the major bidding project of "The General History of Chinese Character's Development". Wang Guiwei once stated, "New knowledge is mostly derived from new discovery." He also said that "it is a great honor for us to have the materials which are recorded in books or papers. And it is also a pleasure for us to have newly-found materials which are discovered under the ground". Compared with Wang Guowei, we were born in the 21st century when the materials about ancient Chinese character were obtained through archaeological excavations and other channels are quite more than those in the past, so we are more fortunate than him. For example, a great number of materials about the ancient Chinese character in Shang dynasty, Zhou dynasty, Qin dynasty, and Han dynasty have been continuously publicized including the "Inscriptions on Oracle Bones in the East of Garden Village", "Inscriptions on Oracle Bones in Xiaotun Village", "Guodian Chu Jian". They have shown us the real image of Chinese character in different periods of Chinese history, so that we can have a comprehensive knowledge of the ancient Chinese character.

Chinese character, which has gone through thousands of years of development and is still in use by people, has become a miracle in the history of the world's languages… Regrettably, however, no book has yet to be published to state the history of Chinese character's development in a true sense.(Huang et al., 2014, p.7)

In the forest of characters in the world, Chinese character is both a longevity-pine and an evergreen tree. However, how do the old and the Evergreen Chinese character turn into the straight-lined official script and regular script from the curving Oracles? What changes have been involved in the form, structure, and in the use of Chinese character in different periods? Is there any law in the development of Chinese character? In order to answer these questions, we have to explore the history of Chinese character's development.

The emergence of the book *The Development* does meet the need. With regard to the form, structure and usage of Chinese character, the book has made a detailed analysis of them respectively, thus presenting a vivid process of Chinese character's development to us. The book is mainly composed of eight chapters. The first chapter states the problems facing the study on Chinese character's development including exploring the past and status quo of Chinese character's theories and its development, as well as the fundamental work needed to carry out when studying the development of Chinese character. The following six chapters (from the second chapter to the seventh chapter) are the main body of the paper, which respectively expound the development of the different categories of Chinese character[1] at various stages in terms of its form, the development of its glyph, as well as the structure and the usage of Chinese character. The eighth chapter is a summary of the first few chapters. It gives us a review of the basic situation and trend of Chinese character's development in the different periods of history, as well as introduces the development of the formation system of Chinese character and the norms of using Chinese character. General laws of Chinese character's development are also summarized in this part. The book has made an immense contribution to the study on Chinese character's development, enabling us to have a clear understanding of the different stages of Chinese character's development. Besides, the book is filled with many innovative ideas; its argumentation is reasonable and serious. So it is worth reading. It is firmly believed by the author that the production of the book itself will accelerate the progress of the study on Chinese character's development and on philology in multiple aspects.

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[1] The book divides the history of ancient Chinese character's development into four stage which are prehistoric stage (from late New Era to Xia dynasty), the ancient stage (from Xia dynasty to Qin dynasty), contemporary stage (from Han dynasty to Qing Dynasty), modern stage (since the early 20th century). Besides, it divides the materials about the development of ancient Chinese character into five categories including the Chinese character in Shang dynasty, the Chinese character in Western Zhou dynasty, the Chinese character in spring and autumn Period, the Chinese character in Warring States Period, and the Chinese character in Qin dynasty.

1. THE PHYSICAL FEATURES OF ANCIENT CHINESE CHARACTER AT DIFFERENT STAGES AND THE LAWS OF ITS DEVELOPMENT

In Philology, the "form" of Chinese characters is collectively known as glyph and font. Glyph refers to the external features of an individual Chinese character, while the font refers to the synthesis of the external features of Chinese character at a certain stage, that is, the general characteristics of Chinese character in terms of its external physical features and writing styles. (Huang et al., 2014, p.43) In fact, there are many scholars who have studied the evolution of ancient Chinese character' form. Qiu Xigui, referred to in his "An Introduction to Chinese Philology", "from the perspective of Chinese characters' form, it mainly goes through a change from a original complex form to a simplified form… a change from pictographic character to non-pictographic character, which is the most obvious change we can notice in the evolution of ancient Chinese character… in order to accelerate writing, ancient Chinese people gradually changed the form of Chinese character into the one that was composed of relatively straight lines, and transformed Chinese character into symbols that were less pictographic. This process could be called as "the change of Chinese character' form into lines". However, during the revolution of ancient Chinese character into seal character, the writing has undergone many more changes. Most of the characters almost completely lost their pictographic features. They became symbols whose formations were composed of strokes such as dot stroke, left-falling stroke, and so on. This process is known as "the change of Chinese character' form into strokes"… on the other hand, in the process of the development of Chinese characters, there were also phenomena that the form of Chinese characters became more complex." (Qiu, 1988, p.29)

"An Introduction to Philology" revealed the laws of the "simplification" and "complexity" of Chinese characters' form, and regarded "the change of Chinese character' form into lines" and "the change of Chinese character' form into strokes" as two approaches to simplifying Chinese character. In this sense, the book written by Qiu enables us to have a general knowledge of the evolution of Chinese character' form. Nevertheless, it is just an overview and summary of the development of Chinese Characters' form in the past millennium. It did not detail the changes of Chinese characters' form in different periods. The books of some other scholars are also not comprehensive, which only touch the evolution of a certain category of Chinese character in a certain period. But *The Development* covered the evolution of all the Chinese characters' form in the whole Chinese history, giving a detailed discussion from the Oracles in Shang \dynasty to the Seal Character in Qin dynasty and to the Official Script in Han dynasty.

Besides, the book itself also puts forward dynamic analysis and static analysis when analyzing the glyph of ancient Chinese character. Static analysis refers to an analysis of the glyph of Chinese character in a certain period on the basis of its strokes such as dot strokes and lines, and on the basis of the features of connecting and combining (including the direction of combination) the strokes. While dynamic analysis means a study on the phenomena of Chinese characters' evolution such as adding, convergence, variation, replacement, and erroneous transformation. (Huang et al., 2014, p.45)

In addition, this book not only makes a synchronic exploration of Chinese character' form, but also makes a comparative analysis of the characters from a diachronic perspective, combing "static" analysis with "dynamic" analysis. When it comes to the development of Chinese character' form, there are common laws affecting the its evolution, whether the character was in the Shang dynasty, the Western Zhou dynasty, the Spring Festival Period, the Warring States Period, or the Qin dynasty. And the characters in different dynasties have different features. According to *The Development*, "the change of Chinese character' form into lines", "symbolization", and "convergence" are the general direction that ancient Chinese character developed towards. And the evolution of Chinese characters' form shows the characteristics of the times and stages when the characters are in. (Huang et al., 2014, p.502)

The direction of glyph, number of strokes, and the radicals of Oracles in the Shang dynasty were not fixed. The bronze inscriptions of the Shang dynasty were almost written with "bold strokes". Characters' forms were achieved through facsimileing the shape of the referents, so they were very pictographic. Then in the Western Zhou dynasty, Chinese characters tended to be composed of more lines and were more flat, except the bronze inscriptions in the early period which were many pictographic. Besides, the characters in the Western Zhou dynasty seemed to add radicals. Yet the direction of glyph, number of strokes, and the radicals were gradually fixed at this stage. The arrangement of some inscriptions was horizontal and vertical; the front size was unified; Strokes were in symmetry; so we can see that the writing of such Chinese characters began to be in accordance with certain norms.

The Chinese character in the spring and autumn Period evolved following the lead of that in the Western Zhou Dynasty, whose glyph continued to be reflected by lines. At that time, curving writing began to win people's heart. Due to different styles of people's writing, the curving lines often became flat and turned into flat symbols, which resulted in the gradual emergence of local features in character writing. In the Warring States period, the Chinese character… the glyph of which was rarely neat and fair. Simplification was popular at that time when people usually used curving writing, and when local styles of writing were significant. Those lines and strokes which were rounded and curving gradually became flat and spontaneous… The Chinese character in the Qin Dynasty formed its own style while inheriting the

characteristics of the character in the Western Zhou dynasty and in the spring and autumn period, which used curving and neat lines as the main glyph. (Huang et al., 2014, p.503)

Since the Shang Dynasty, Chinese character showed the tendency of "simplification", "differentiation", "categorization", and "optimization" in the course of its evolution. (Huang et al., 2014, p.503) "The evolution of official script" marked the end of ancient Chinese character's glyph, and signified that ancient Chinese character was transformed into modern Chinese character. However, the evolution of Chinese character's glyph was continuing at the new stage. The development of official script and regular script is another topic facing the research on the development of Chinese character.

2. DESCRIPTION OF THE STRUCTURE AND USE OF THE ANCIENT CHINESE CHARACTER AT DIFFERENT STAGES

2.1 The Structure of Ancient Chinese Character

According to *The Development*, two aspects were involved in the structural analysis of the ancient Chinese character. The first is to generalize the types of the surface structure of the Chinese character; the second is to explore the generation mode of Chinese character's deep structure, which is to explore the formation of Chinese character… The former is the assemblage of Chinese characters which are formed according to the same formation methods. Here the formation method means the way in which Chinese characters are formed. It also refers to the way of generating the Chinese characters as symbols. (Huang et al., 2014, p.70)

As early as the pre-Qin dynasty, some structural analysis of the Chinese characters had appeared in some books. These records reflect the preliminary understanding of the structure of ancient Chinese characters. In the process of analyzing the structure of the Chinese characters, the ancient Chinese people had gradually formed a set of mature theoretical system, that is, the so-called "Six Books" which referred to six different structures of Chinese characters. The book of Xu Shen *Shuowen Jiezi* is the first book that applies the established theory—"Six Books" to analyze the structure of the Chinese characters in the works at that time. The theory of 'Six Books' has been adopted till now since its inception. In the Qing dynasty, the scholar Dai Zhen put forward his own theory which included four structural types of characters (pictographs, self-explanatory characters, ideographic characters, and phonograms) as well as two other kinds of characters–loan characters and mutually explanatory characters (the two types of characters are not newly coined like the afore-mentioned four types). He was of the view that only the former four types were closely connected with the structure of the Chinese characters, whereas the notions such as "loan characters"

and "mutually explanatory characters" belong to another dimension of the Chinese characters. However, it is worth mentioning that there has been no satisfying definition of mutually explanatory characters.

The Development categorizes the ancient Chinese characters into four types: pictographs, self-explanatory characters, ideographic characters, and phonograms. Through the comparative analysis of structural types of characters from Shang dynasty to Qin dynasty, the dynamic evolution of the structure of Chinese characters can be clearly demonstrated.

According to the statistics (revealed in *The Development*), the phonograms in the Shang dynasty accounted for 41.9% in all the existing characters at that period; those in Western Zhou dynasty accounted for 56.4%, while the newly coined phonograms accounted for 80.8% of all the new characters; in the Spring and Autumn period, the phonograms accounted for 69.2%, and in this period new phonograms accounted for 95.7% of all the newly coined; in the Warring States , the ratio rose further to 81.38%, and the new phonograms accounted for a staggering 99% of the newly coined words.

The Development clearly showed us the development course of the structure of the ancient Chinese characters: in the Shang dynasty ideographic characters were the main type including pictographic, self-explanatory and ideographic characters, while the formation of picto-phonetic characters had not been widely emergent. From the Western Zhou dynasty, as the ideographic characters were gradually eliminated, the picto-phonetic characters began to become the most widely used ones and had seen the greatest increase in number among the newly coined characters. During the Warring States time, the picto-phonetic characters experienced a further development and they had accounted for nearly 100% among the newly coined characters.

2.2 The Use of Ancient Chinese Character

The use of ancient Chinese character means using the character itself, which shows the recording function of Chinese characters. Due to various reasons in the practical use, Chinese characters may make internal changes. Besides, complicated relationship will be established among the different characters. Analyzing the usage of Chinese character refers to investigate and analyze the specific use of the characters in a certain period and explore the complex relations among them. (Huang et al., 2014, p.86)

The analysis of the usage of Chinese characters covers various contents. *The Development* discusses the total number of the use of ancient Chinese characters which belong to different categories at different periods. Besides, it also accounts the frequency of different Chinese characters. In addition, it introduces the situations of words which are most used and words which are rarely used. There are also some contents in the book explaining

the Chinese variantcharacters, loan characters, and homoglyph, as well as the relations between different characters (including homologous differentiation, etc.). Moreover, the book also touches the writing of characters. In this sense, the analysis of the usage of Chinese character is of great significance for the study on the history of ancient Chinese character, "whether it was handed-down materials or excavated materials, they both are good records of the evolution of ancient Chinese characters and of the change in people's usage of the characters. So they are significant for the exploration of Chinese character's evolution." (Huang et al., 2014, p.87)

According to *The Development*, in 1483 Western Zhou characters which could be recognized, 840 of them are the same as those of the Shang Dynasty. Furthermore, we can find that in 1672 spring and autumn period's characters, there are 1047 characters that directly follow those in the previous period. Besides, 2886 of 4018 Warring States Period's characters are also got from the previous period. Therefore, we can safely conclude that although the total number of characters from Western Zhou Dynasty to Warring States Period increases and the absolute number are increasingly growing, the characters which are directly used by borrowing from the previous stages still pervade. This reflects the features of Chinese characters that they come down in one continuous line and that the system of Chinese character itself enjoys good stability.

Character is used to record language. By examining the relationship between the characters, *The Development* enables us to fully realize the interaction between Chinese characters and Chinese language. In specific, the two are mutually contradictory: The existence of the phenomenon that a word with more than one characters and a character with more than one words affects the accuracy of characters to record language; besides, the two also influence each other: the differentiation of special characters enables the system of Chinese character to improve its accuracy to record language.

In addition, *The Development* touched upon the writing of characters. Chinese characters eventually have to be presented on carriers through people's using tools. In the process of writing, various writing problems will occur due to numerous reasons such as Chongwen, Hewen, slip of writing, and so on. All these are about the writing of Chinese characters.

From the observation of Chinese characters structure, we can find that the pictophonetic character became more and more popular and finally became the major force in the process of Chinese character's development. However, ideographic characters gradually waned and finally disappeared. By studying the use of Chinese character, we can have a better understanding of the growth of multiple systems of Chinese character. For example, Chinese characters in ancient times mainly develop in an inherited way, so the amounts of frequently-used characters are almost same at various stages. The relationship between

characters and the relations between character and word has continuously developed so as to adapt to each other. The writing of characters in different periods is also different in individual style and in the feature of the times.

3. ARGUMENTATION IS CREDIBLE AND INNOVATIVE

Quantitative analysis is a major feature of the argumentation in *The Development*. In the argumentation of the structure and usage of Chinese characters in the Shang dynasty, Western Zhou dynasty, Spring and Autumn Period, Warring States Period and Qin dynasty, the book not only counted the total number of the characters respectively, but also counted the number of the characters with different structures in different periods, including those that were newly-added and which directly followed the characters in the previous periods, respectively. Besides, the book counted the proportion of the newly-added characters, of the characters having different structures, and of the characters inherited from the previous period among the total number of the characters in different periods. In this sense, by giving specific numbers and by comparison and contrast, the book directly proved the change of Chinese characters' formation and proved that the use of Chinese characters in different periods was distinctive. Moreover, since numbers are easy to understand and authentic, the results of argumentation are undoubtedly convincing. When discussing the structure and usage of Chinese characters, the book even dares to list all the statistical results. This is not only beneficial to scholars' oversight of its argumentation, but also helps people to continue to study the topic in the future, thus reflecting the great mind and confidence of the creative team who has finished this book.

It is also worthy of mentioning that the book shows creative ideas in the establishment of theories and in the textual criticism and interpretation of individual Chinese characters. This reflects good accomplishment of the authors of the book in terms of their study on ancient Chinese characters.

3.1 From the Perspective of Theory Establishment

The controversy over the demarcation line of Chinese characters' history has always been a hot issue, for which different scholars have different ideas. (Huang et al., 2014, pp.8-10) According to *The Development*, the standard to judge the demarcation line should be based on the change of Chinese character' own system, should be built on the foundation of Chinese characters' form, and should give full consideration to the development of Chinese characters' structure, especially to the change of Chinese characters' function. So it divides the history of Chinese character's development into four stages which are prehistoric stage (from late New Era to Xia dynasty), the ancient stage (from Xia dynasty to Qin dynasty), contemporary stage (from Han dynasty to Qing dynasty),

modern stage (since the early 20th century). This division is completely built on the nature of philology, which will be of great significance to the study on Chinese character.

In addition, proceeding from the current development of paleography, the book advocates listing the Chinese character in the spring and autumn Period as a separate category, so as to distinguish it from the character in the Western Zhou dynasty. This proposal fully takes into account the characteristics of the characters in the spring and autumn Period in terms of the form, structure, and usage, as well as takes into consideration its important position in the history of Chinese character's development, which is conducive to the further development of the study on ancient Chinese characters.

3.2 From the Perspective of the Textual Criticism and Explanation of Individual Chinese Character

There are many interpretations for the Oracle character 雨 such as "霝", "霽", and "雹" . However, Li Xueqin advocates interpreting it as "雨". *The Development* proceeds from the writing features of Oracles, and argues that Oracle characters were carved by knives. So the bold strokes and clumps of Oracles later turned into single lines or were outlined remaining contours. In this sense, it is conceivable that "雨" is another writing of "雨", which furthers supports Li Xueqin's viewpoint.

Since the book points out that there is an existence of allogeneic blend in the case of the enrichment of Chinese characters in the Western Zhou dynasty, it is presumable that the character "散" is a blend of its variants—"䚄" and "䏯" when it is regarded as the form of "散".

CONCLUSION

New theories and new interpretations for Chinese characters are conducive to the further development of the study on ancient Chinese characters. The new ideas and value of the book— "The Development of Ancient Chinese Character" are far from being those mentioned above. What the paper talks about here is only a small part of the new ideas and value of the book. It should be bore in mind that the publication of the book has filled the gaps in the development of the study on Chinese characters, has showed readers the historical process and the basic laws of ancient Chinese character's evolution, and has established a theoretical framework for the development of the study on Chinese characters, as well as has laid good foundation for the study on the general history of Chinese characters' development.

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