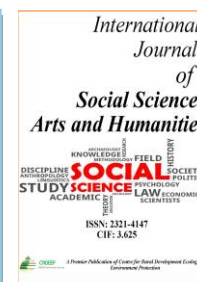


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Research Paper

Origin and Development of the Chinese Writing System

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ABSTRACT

Chinese characters are among the most complex scripts in the world. They originated thousands of years ago, and as records suggest, they evolved during the Shang Dynasty. Since then, numerous advancements and ideas have been introduced, but the core principles of character formation were established at the very beginning of Chinese civilisation. This paper aims to examine how these characters evolved and how, despite many deliberations and attempts to replace them with more practical options, scholars and the Chinese government ultimately recognised the importance of maintaining what was introduced centuries ago. It is especially noteworthy that China has managed to preserve its origins from the earliest Shang Dynasty, and these concepts are still in use today, albeit in a simplified form.

1. Introduction

Chinese script has long been regarded as a medium for expressing and transmitting Chinese culture, as early Chinese people began using it to convey ideas. This marks a significant and unique cultural development from China's formative period (Chen, 2016). Additionally, the most fundamental aspect of Chinese civilisation's history is the script, known as Chinese characters 汉字. These characters are one of the most challenging writing systems in the world. It is composed of various strokes. These strokes are mainly lines or curves that are written or drawn on paper by people without lifting the pen from the paper. Primarily, there are eight basic strokes, known as horizontal stroke 横, vertical stroke 竖, dot 点, left falling stroke 撇, right falling stroke 捺, rising stroke 提, hook stroke 钩 and turning stroke 折。 When writing a Chinese character, mastering the use of strokes and stroke order is crucial. These fundamental strokes are essential for writing any Chinese characters. If, while writing a character, one does not follow this stroke order, the character will not look correct, which can lead to conveying an incorrect meaning. Chinese characters are written and created with the help of these strokes recognized as one of the oldest writing systems, Chinese characters have been in continuous use since their inception.

Although many changes have occurred over time, the fundamental concept has remained unchanged. It originally started with pictographs and was gradually supplemented by various principles of the Chinese writing system. In ancient days, Chinese men began expressing their ideas and opinions by drawing various shapes, initially on sand and later on tortoise and oracle bones. Looking back at Chinese history, the Shang dynasty is regarded as the first recognized dynasty of China and marks the end of this early period. It was during the Shang dynasty that written records first appeared. Many also consider the Xia to be the first dynasty, but it is viewed as a mythical dynasty since no written records of it exist. According to popular saying, Chinese characters were invented by Cang Jie (Chen, 2024), but this is seen as merely a legend. Characters were objects that

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needed to be widely used and recognized, and a single person could not create them; instead, it was the contribution of many ancient men. The existence of written language in the Shang dynasty proves that the Chinese language is more than 3000 years old. In those days, it was mainly used for divination purposes, appearing on ritual bronze vessels and on tortoise and ox bones. By the end of the Shang dynasty, the script had become well-developed, recording a main sense of history and human activities. It indicates that the Shang dynasty civilization was already very advanced.

While mainly using it for divination and prediction purposes, some form of poetic expression had already emerged by this dynasty. The casting of these pictographic scripts on bronze vessels also indicates that the Shang dynasty was already advanced in metal casting. These writings take us back to the society of the Shang dynasty and tell us many things about the people, about the culture and how people lived at the time. This is a significant contribution to the development of Chinese civilization, helping to record ancient trends and preserve them for future generations. With pictographic script, the gradual development of compound characters also began. Ancient Chinese people experimented with ways to express their ideas, and together they created a wonderful language now known as Chinese characters. Since the core of these characters was pictographs, the evolution included the addition of compound characters, indicative characters, phonetic loan characters, and the solidification of phonetic characters. Some borrowed characters also began to appear. The earliest widely used pictographic characters, 象形, are considered among the most ancient forms, mainly imitating what was observed. For example, to depict the sun, they used a large circle with dots ☉ or a horizontal line inside 日. Similarly, a circle represented the moon, 月, and other symbols conveyed various ideas. (DeFrancis, 1984). Using simple indicative characters, such as 一 for one, 二 for two, and 三 for three, characters were mainly used to denote numbers or directions. Additionally, characters like 上 for above and 山 (and 下 for below) were used to indicate placement above or below each other.

Compound indicative characters, also known as 会意, refer to characters formed by combining two indicative characters, such as 明. 明 is composed of a sun and a moon to signify brightness. The same rule applies to 休, where a man (人) is resting under a 树 (tree), symbolizing taking a rest. Under this tree, the person might be leaning against it, resting. Another example is 林, which consists of two woods or many trees together, indicating a jungle. (Ma et al., 2024). Phonetic loan characters are characters used to represent words with the same or similar pronunciation but different original meanings. For example, the character 来. The character is borrowed for its sound rather than its original image. The character 我, which was once used as a pictograph for a weapon, was borrowed to represent the first-person pronoun. Gradually, the original meaning of the weapon faded, and 我 became a widely used character to express 'I'. Semantic phonetic characters are another category, representing a further extension of the phonetic lone principle. In this case, different homophone words stand for the same character and are mainly distinguished by adding semantic elements to the phonetic component. The semantic component denotes the meaning, while the phonetic component mostly hints at the pronunciation. For example, 湖 and 河. 氵 indicates a water-related element. The latter part of 湖 and 河 suggests a similar sound generated by combining semantic and phonetic elements, such as 瞿, 说, 谈, etc. Another category of Chinese characters is transfer characters. These characters, which share origins, usually derive from a single character and have the same or related meanings, often due to variations in pronunciation or dialect.

These categories form the foundation of Chinese characters, which, as previously discussed and based on written records, emerged around the Shang dynasty. In 1971, approximately twenty-one oracle bones were unearthed in present-day China. Researchers and scholars specializing in this field believe that these writings may have developed gradually over a long period locally. Some suggest that these developments started as early as 4800 BC, mainly evidenced by oracle bones, oxen, and tortoise shells. These ancient inscriptions on animal shells and vessels are mainly read from top to bottom and from right to left. These writings surprisingly also incorporate Mesopotamian principles of one-sign syllables (Fisher, 2020), which indicates contact with other civilizations and suggests that symbols were exchanged and borrowed. Chinese characters and the writing system are primarily regarded as syllabic; however, it should be noted that it is not a purely syllabic writing system, as most Chinese characters serve as essential identifiers. This is why the Chinese writing system is considered a

morpheme-based system, making it very distinctive. From a linguistic perspective, Chinese characters are more symbolically representative, meaning they reproduce syllables and sounds more than entire words. (Fisher, 2020) Nevertheless, it also has some disadvantages, as the semantic components in compounds often cause contradictions in specific usages. Also, there is no standard and consistent marking to indicate which element of a character is the sense and which is the sound; some phonetics hold consistent syllable and tone, but some tones and some syllables vary (Fisher, 2020). As China's writing system is very ancient and complex, it has undergone numerous reforms. These reforms include changes to the Chinese characters. Efforts have been made to simplify and make the writing system easier through evolutionary stages. The original Shang pictography developed into formalized symbols, which were later replaced by standardized characters as China evolved from tribal societies and feudal states to a unified monarchy. This era marked the first time the concept of the Chinese nation was united under one ruling dynasty. In the modern period, scholars proposed creating a phonetic scheme mainly based on Latin letters, aiming to achieve universal literacy, though this sparked controversy. Critics argued that such a system might undermine the uniqueness of Chinese characters, which hold significant historical and cultural value. There was debate over whether the phonetic symbols should function as an independent writing system or merely as an aid to traditional characters. The argument was that the traditional script was too complex for ordinary people to master, so a simplified version was needed for better accessibility. In 1913, a conference on the unification of pronunciation was held; most members expressed the desire to adopt a set of thirty-nine phonetic symbols derived from Chinese characters, intended as an adjunct to the characters and to represent Mandarin pronunciation as the national standard. An even more important development was the literary renaissance starting in 1917 and continuing into 1919, which was followed by the May 4th movement. (Defrancis, 1984) As written in an article published in 1918 by a renowned Chinese philologist, Qian Xuantong, it was expressed that Chinese speech and writing were so unsuited to modern times that Esperanto or some other foreign language should replace them. Chen Duxiu, one of the pioneers of the Baihua movement, also rejected this solution and stated that it is impossible. Instead, she suggested that the Chinese speech should be retained, and a new literary style in place of traditional Chinese characters should be introduced, where a less radical proposal would involve retention of characters.

Another Chinese intellectual, Hu Shi, wrote (Defrancis, 1984); "China will need an alphabet in the future. But there are too many monosyllables in the literary language, and it would be impossible to switch to an alphabetic script for stop, so it is first necessary to replace the literary writing with Pinyin writing, and after that to change from Pinyin writing to alphabetic writing." Many scholars agree that this view was introduced to play a vital role in advancing a more convenient system, as advocated by Lu Xun. Not only did he support the new Chinese writing system, but he also proposed that the language of the writing be simplified. Lu Xun, with his story of Ah Q, was among the early advocates of this style. Lu Xun showed interest in the issue of writing reform as early as 1913, which he expressed during a conference on the unification of pronunciation. From August 1934 to December 1935, he authored several articles outlining his perspectives on Chinese writing reform and defending Latinisation against its opponents. The main reason for supporting the new system was its simplicity compared to previous writing systems. Not only was the Chinese writing system proposed for change, but the language of the writing itself was also recommended for simplification. It also had the support of Mao Zedong and some prominent writers like Guo Moruo, Mao Dun, Ma Xulun. However, later, many also proposed that the essence and richness of the origins of these characters should be retained. Instead of wiping them out completely, we should consider simplifying them. Zou Youguang and Ni Haishu expressed a more pessimistic view. Ni Haishu highlighted the general attachment to characters. He pointed out that "one-sided statements that characters are bad will not convince people, nor will one-sided statements that pinyin writing is good. Chinese characters have their good points, and seen in writers have their bad points." He also said that habit is a very irrational thing. This points towards the deep attachment of Chinese people to Chinese characters. (De Francis, 1984). In the 1950s, the Chinese Communist government introduced a series of simplified characters. These characters were mainly based on the handwritten cursive style that had been used by scholars for centuries when writing informally. (Norden 2011) It was primarily for convenience that these characters were simplified. Today, outside the People's Republic of China, the traditional long-form characters are still in use, but in mainland China, these simplified characters are now commonly used. This reform naturally enhanced literacy rates in China as it became easier to write and more accessible to everyone. The simplified characters are based on traditional Chinese characters but with fewer strokes, making them quicker and simpler to write. The simplification process was systematic, involving linguists and scholars who identified the most complex or often miswritten characters, thus making writing more convenient.

2. Conclusion

Chinese characters originated from ancient Chinese people and their thought-provoking ideas. These ideas were so rich and relevant, not only for society at the time but also for future generations. The concepts behind writing and expressions are still

cherished and used in China today. The foundation of these ideas and characters is so strong that, even after various discussions about replacing them with another script, neither the government nor the people were convinced to eliminate them entirely. Instead, it was decided to preserve them with some modifications.

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