

Study on the Evolution and Development of the Chinese Language and Writing System

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Abstract. This study explores the evolution and development of Chinese language and writing, focusing on the origins of Chinese characters, the development of ancient Chinese, and the evolution of modern Chinese. We examine the formation and evolution of ancient Chinese characters, including key periods such as oracle bone inscriptions and jinwen, as well as the standardization and popularization of modern Chinese, as exemplified by Putonghua and Mandarin. In addition, we study the development of written forms of Chinese characters, including the use of simplified and traditional characters. This study aims to gain a deeper understanding of the historical evolution of Chinese language and writing, so as to better understand the development of Chinese culture and society.

Keywords: Chinese character evolution; ancient Chinese language; modern Chinese language.

1. Introduction

Chinese language and writing have a long history and rich cultural connotation. As a writing system, Chinese characters have gone through a long evolutionary process, carrying the vicissitudes of Chinese civilization from the ancient oracle bone inscriptions to the simplification of modern Chinese writing. The development of ancient Chinese and the diversity of dialects have also provided a rich content for the study of Chinese language and writing. Meanwhile, the standardisation and popularisation of modern Chinese have had a profound impact on Chinese society and culture. This paper will delve into this theme in order to reveal the evolution and development of Chinese language and writing.

2. Origin and Evolution of Chinese Characters

2.1. Origins of Ancient Chinese Characters

The origin of ancient Chinese characters is a pivotal moment in the history of the evolution of Chinese writing, marking the formation of Chinese characters as a unique writing system.

The origins of ancient Chinese characters can be traced back to the Shang and Western Zhou dynasties, which lasted from the 14th century BC to the 11th century BC. During this period, the ancestors of ancient China carved writing on tortoise shells and animal bones, a script known as oracle bone writing. The formation and evolution of oracle bone inscriptions were mainly used for divination and prediction, recording good and bad luck and sacrificial rituals. These scripts were hieroglyphic and referential in nature, i.e., they represented things or concepts, such as the sun, the moon, plants and animals, through images and symbols.

Over time, the oracle bone script gradually evolved into Jinwen, which is an inscription and inscripational script on bronze vessels. Jinwen was written in a more standardized and neat manner,

with its hieroglyphic nature diminishing and becoming more abstract and symbolic. This process reflects the gradual development and maturation of the writing system of Chinese characters [1].

Of particular significance in the evolution of Chinese characters is the fact that some of the glyphs in the Jinwen script evolved into the Chinese characters we still use today. For example, some of the glyphs in the Jin script are very close to the forms of modern Chinese characters, such as "man", "mountain" and "water". The origin and evolution of these ancient characters played a crucial role in the formation and development of the Chinese writing system.

2.2. Evolution of Chinese characters and development of writing forms

The evolution of Chinese characters and the development of writing forms is a fascinating chapter in the history of Chinese philology, reflecting the evolution of Chinese characters as a complex and profound writing system.

The evolution of Chinese characters has had a long history, dating as far back as the oracle bone inscriptions and the Jinwen period, between about the 14th and 11th centuries BC. Oracle bone inscriptions, the earliest form of written Chinese characters, were originally inscribed on tortoise shells and animal bones, and were used for divination, recording rituals, and predicting good and bad fortune. These scripts were characterized by their distinctly pictographic nature, i.e. they attempted to simulate actual objects and concepts, such as the sun, the moon, people, flora and fauna, etc., through images and symbols.

With the passage of time, oracle bone inscriptions gradually evolved into gold inscriptions, a form of writing widely found on bronzes. Compared with oracle bone inscriptions, Jinwen was more standardised and neatly written, with the hieroglyphic nature gradually diminishing and the symbolic and abstract features increasing. Jinwen was an important stage in the evolution of ancient Chinese characters and laid the foundation for later forms of Chinese writing.

With the evolution of Chinese characters, Jinwen gradually developed into the Small Seal Script, which is the standard form of writing Chinese characters and is used for engraving inscriptions. The Small Seal Script played a key role in standardising the writing of Chinese characters by making it more concise and the symbols more uniform, which led to the standardisation of the writing of Chinese characters. Another important development is the Regular Script, which is the art form of Chinese character writing, pursuing the beauty and standardisation of writing. The Regular Script is one of the peaks of Chinese character calligraphy and has had a profound impact on the transmission and development of Chinese character calligraphy.

3. Development of the ancient Chinese language

3.1. Comparison of literary and vernacular language

Written language and vernacular language represent two major stages in the evolution of the Chinese language, reflecting the characteristics of ancient and modern culture, society and language, respectively. The literary language, also known as Guwen, is the classical form of ancient Chinese literature and writing, originating in the pre-Qin period and continuing into the Qing Dynasty. Its writing style is elaborate and refined, emphasising literary rhetoric and metre. The literary language uses ancient Chinese characters and vocabulary, as well as ancient grammatical structures, including the Six Books and strict norms for character sounds, meanings, and shapes. It is mainly used in the fields of ancient literature, poetry, and philosophical writings, but not in oral communication.

In contrast, the vernacular language represents the writing and expression style of modern Chinese. The vernacular language is characterized by a clear and concise writing style that emphasises direct expression and ease of understanding. It uses modern Chinese characters and vocabulary, adopts a grammatical structure closer to the spoken language, and focuses on the practicality of the language. The vernacular language has become the main form of modern writing and communication, and is

widely used in journalism, essays, novels, scientific and technical literature, and daily communication [2].

3.2. Emergence and diversity of dialects

The emergence and diversity of dialects have played an important role in the history of Chinese language evolution, reflecting the cultural and linguistic diversity of China's vast geographic area. The diversity of Chinese dialects is rooted in the vast geography of China. As history evolved, people in different regions developed their own dialects to adapt to the local society, culture and environment. The formation of these dialects is usually due to a variety of factors such as geographical barriers, historical separation, and social interaction. As a result, China has a large number of dialects, each reflecting the characteristics and culture of the local community.

Differences between dialects are expressed at several levels, including pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and grammatical structure. Dialects from different regions may have different phonetic characteristics, such as accent, intonation and pronunciation. In addition, dialects may also differ in vocabulary and grammar, including the use of different words to express the same concepts and the adoption of different grammatical structures. These differences between dialects make it possible for people from different regions to experience barriers to understanding and communication, especially in oral communication.

The diversity of dialects reflects China's cultural richness and regional differences. Each dialect carries the history, traditions and cultural values of a particular community. Dialects have their own unique ways of expression in literature, music and theatre, enriching China's cultural heritage. In addition, the existence of dialects poses challenges, such as the potential for linguistic uniformity when implementing standardized education and media communication across the country. The diversity of Chinese dialects is remarkable in China, so let's look at a few examples of dialects to better understand this:

Cantonese (Yue): Cantonese is the main dialect spoken in Guangdong Province and Hong Kong, and differs significantly from Mandarin. For example, the pronunciation of Cantonese is very unique, and the use of tones is very important. For example, "你好" in Mandarin is pronounced as "唔該" (ngo5 goi1) in Cantonese, which has a different tone and pronunciation. This example shows the significant difference in pronunciation between dialects.

Sichuanese: Sichuanese is the main dialect of Southwest China, and one of its characteristics is the use of a large number of dialectal words. For example, in Sichuan dialect, "delicious" can be expressed as "好睏" (hǎo kùn). This use of different words reflects the diversity of vocabulary in the dialect.

Shanghainese (Wu): Shanghainese is the main dialect of the city of Shanghai in eastern China, and its grammatical structure differs from that of Mandarin. For example, "I don't know" in Mandarin may be expressed as "俺弗知道" (nga fan zhi du) in Shanghainese, with different grammatical structures and vocabulary usage.

4. Evolution of Modern Chinese

4.1. Standardisation and popularisation of modern Chinese language

The standardisation and popularisation of modern Chinese represents the evolution and development of Chinese as a universal language. The standardisation of modern Chinese is mainly reflected in the promotion and standardisation of Putonghua. Mandarin is the official language of China and one of the most widely spoken languages in the world. Its standard pronunciation is based on Beijing dialect, which is regarded as the official pronunciation standard of the Chinese state. This standardisation helps people from different regions to communicate better, reduces dialect barriers, and facilitates national and international communication.

The popularisation of Putonghua is particularly notable in mainland China. The Chinese government has taken a number of measures, such as universal Mandarin education, the use of Mandarin in radio and television media, and mandatory Mandarin standards in official documents and academic settings. These measures have helped to improve the standardisation of the Chinese language and enable more people to understand and use Mandarin effectively [3].

In addition to its popularity at home, modern Chinese is also spreading rapidly internationally. Chinese as a second language is being learnt by more and more people, and Chinese language examinations (such as the HSK) are widely recognized around the world. The rise of Chinese culture, business and technology has also contributed to the international spread of the Chinese language.

4.2. Use of simplified and traditional characters

Simplified characters and traditional characters represent two different directions in the writing forms of Chinese characters, reflecting the writing habits of mainland China and Taiwan, Hong Kong and other regions respectively.

Simplified characters (简体字) is a form of writing Chinese characters that has been promoted in mainland China since the 1950s. Its main purpose is to increase the literacy rate, promote literacy, and improve the efficiency of writing. Through simplification, the number of strokes in some Chinese characters has been reduced, making them easier to write and more user-friendly, especially for children and adult beginners. Some common characters such as "学" and "中国" have been simplified. Simplified characters are widely used in mainland China and are the official standard [4].

Traditional Chinese characters, also known as orthographic characters, are the traditional form of writing Chinese characters, retaining more details of strokes and structure [5]. Traditional characters are still the dominant form of writing in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, and overseas Chinese communities, and have also been preserved and passed on in cultural, historical, and religious contexts. Many traditional characters have a unique aesthetic and expressive quality in calligraphy and art, and thus have a profound influence in traditional culture.

Although simplified and traditional characters differ in writing form, the nature of the language between them remains unchanged, and they are therefore mutually intelligible. This difference in writing form is mainly in the variation of strokes, while the vocabulary and grammatical structure remain basically the same. As a result, Chinese speakers can usually understand and use simplified or traditional characters as needed.

5. Conclusion

The study of the evolution and development of Chinese language and writing is a discipline rich in depth and breadth, which explores the historical evolution of the Chinese language as one of the oldest and most complex languages in the world. By studying the origins of Chinese characters, the development of ancient Chinese, the standardisation of modern Chinese, the diversity of dialects, and the use of simplified and traditional characters, we can better understand the richness, colourfulness, and multidimensionality of Chinese language and writing.

In the future, the study of Chinese characters will continue to provide valuable insights into the fields of Chinese writing, linguistics, cultural studies and education. Developments in this field will promote respect for and the promotion of cultural diversity, and will also help to deepen cross-cultural communication and understanding between the Chinese-speaking world and the rest of the globe.

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