The Nature of Chinese Characters

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ABSTRACT

How to determine Chinese characters' nature scientifically involves the construction and understanding of the system of Chinese characters, which has been academic circles' focal point ever since the 20th century with great differences. The nature of Chinese characters is the core of the research on the basic theory of Chinese characters. In this paper, five representative viewpoints on the nature of Chinese characters are analysed. From the induction and analysis of various theories, it can be seen that Chinese characters' different stages have their own characteristics, thus summarizing Chinese characters' essential characteristics, and expounding one's own shallow understanding of this problem.

Keywords: Chinese characters, Nature, The ideograph Characters

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is a symbol system combining sound and meaning, and It is also the most important communication tool for human beings. Languages and characters are gradually formed and developed in the long-term practice of human social life. Languages always appear earlier than words. [1] Many linguists believe that words are only a writing symbol system for recording language, and the word itself does not belong to the language system.

Chinese character is a symbol system created by the Han people for a long time in order to exchange ideas, transmit information and preserve information. Naturally, life and community are the noumenon of Chinese characters, as well as the genesis of Chinese characters. The observation is recorded by Chinese characters faithfully, thinking and understanding of various things by Han people for thousands of years. The various types of structures used in it, the concepts expressed by different construction types, and how to materialize the thinking of the word-makers, belonging to the Chinese character culture. Chinese characters' nature is the most significant topic in Chinese characters' research, and it is of realistic value and fantastic theoretic implication to examine its nature.

Since the early 1980s, the debate about Chinese characters' nature has become Chinese character research's focus. For a retentive time, the researchers, nevertheless, analysed the distinct viewpoints of the issue, the different criteria applied, and the complexity of the Chinese characters themselves, so that they have not gotten into a consensus on Chinese characters' nature. But each theory has its unique background and academic background, so each theory has a certain value. Here are some of the most popular theories.

2. SOME DISCUSSIONS OF THE NATURE OF CHINESE CHARACTERS

2.1. The ideograph Characters Theory

The first to make a judgment about the nature of Chinese characters was the linguist Saussure. In *General Linguistics Tutorial*, he believes that Chinese characters are ideograms. "There are only two systems of words in the world, one is the ideology, that is, a word is symbolized through exclusively one symbol, which has got a relation with the entire word. A model example of this system is Chinese characters." [2] The idea of this view has had a great impact on the study of Chinese characters, though he does not go further to account for Chinese characters' particular nature.

Domestic scholars also agree with this statement. Although they agree that the essence of this view is different, there is one matter they all approve on, that is, Chinese characters themselves get the features of uttering definite significations. Liang Donghan has the opinion that "square Chinese characters are ideographic features" [3] whereas supposing that Chinese characters are ideographic, he indicates Chinese characters' unique aspect in shape, that is, square shape. Ye chuqiang also adopts Saussure's points of view. He say that character symbols always express a certain language unit (whole sentence, word or morpheme, syllable, phoneme), and what adapts to the whole sentence is pictorial characters; what adapts to words or morphemes is ideographic characters; what adapts to syllables is syllabic characters; what adapts to phonemes is Pinyin characters. Chinese characters are ideographic characters, and each quality is fundamentally a symbol of morphemes and monosyllabic words. We must understand ideographic characters from this angle, and not think that the meaning of Chinese characters can be seen from the form of Chinese characters themselves."

[4] The prevailing Chinese characters, Chinese characters, are the alone representative of ideographic characters on earth today. [5] Since then, the idea that Chinese characters are ideographic characters has been widely accepted by scholars, and it has been widely used in some monographs and textbooks.

Chinese characters' ideographic nature is illustrated in the intimate relation between signification and shape, that is, the characteristic of implied meaning by form is particularly prominent in the ancient Chinese character stage before Xiaozhuan. The oracle bone inscriptions and gold inscriptions in Shang and Zhou dynasties expressed the meaning of words by means of image, with a strong color of depicting objects. They expressed the connotation of words directly or tortuously, and knew the meaning from the form, these are ideograph's characteristics.

The structure of modern Chinese characters under the Lishu script has undergone dramatic changes, from lines to strokes, completely changing the pictographic features. Most Chinese characters can no longer express the meaning of words from the form. It seems that they only record syllables, but in fact they still use individual characters to distinguish words or morphemes. In addition to variant characters like "灾、灾、栽", different forms still have different meanings Taking homophones such as "文、蚊、纹、汶、雯", though they exhibit the equivalent pronunciation, they are still different in semantics because they are recorded in different forms. However, due to the disappearance of the characteristics of form and meaning, further symbolization has not fundamentally broken away from the ideographic system.

The ideographic character of Chinese characters also shows that it does not directly express the pronunciation of words, but uses specific symbols to express words or morphemes in the language. Words or morphemes with the same sound but different meanings generally need to be distinguished by different forms, and the equal word can likewise be symbolized by using distinct shapes, which makes Chinese characters' structure complicated and numerous, tens of thousands.

The ideographic nature of Chinese characters is also reflected in its super dialect (including spoken language). For example, the pronunciation of the words such as "xiezi(鞋子)、zhidao（知道）、zhaogu(照顾)" are different in different dialect areas, but the writing method of Chinese characters is the same, which may not be understood when spoken, but can be understood at a glance after writing; for example, dajie(大街)-dagai(大街)、keren(客人)-qie(客)、kong(孔)-kulong(窟窿)、zang(脏)-maitai(埋汰)etc, They all have recorded language and uttered language. At this time, the Chinese characters recording the written language have super oral visual effect. You can't understand the meaning of "家里来客(qiě)了", but the content of "visitors at home" can be understood by you.

2.2. The Phonemic Characters Theory

Saussure names another kind of writing system as Phonemic characters. "Commonly referred to as the 'voice' system, the purpose of which is to write a series of continuous sounds in a word. The phonemic characters are sometimes syllable, sometimes alphanumeric, based on elements that can no longer be reduced in speech. "[6]Mr. Yao Xiaosui, he thinks that "As far as the whole system of Oracle, in sessions of its evolution step, in terms of its fundamental function and role, each of its symbols have a fixed pronunciation, is entirely a system of phonic text, has developed to the stage of the phonic text."[6] by finding out the fact that there is phonetic loan in Oracle. Its fundamental function is not to express concepts through these symbols, it is wrong to describe it as ideographs. However, the false phonetic nature is a matter of the use of words, and if it is determined that the nature of Chinese characters is to be linked to its function, then it is expected to puzzle the essential distinction between ideograph and phonograph.

Phonemic characters use letters to represent phonemes or syllables in a language, and use letter combinations to stand for words' signification. Both English and Russian belong to this type of text, and the phonemes or syllables in a language are limited, so the number of letters is not large. Generally speaking, as long as you master the letters and spelling rules, you can spell a word when you hear it and pronounce a word when you see it, so it is comparatively easy to study. Since Chinese characters stand for the signification of morphemes or words, rather than fixed letters that represent a particular sound, a learned person may be unable to pronounce new words when he/she sees them, and may be unable to write new words when he/she hears them. The same Chinese character is pronounced differently in different dialects and foreign languages, but the meaning it represents is not far from each other.

It is considered that Chinese characters are phonetic characters, which are viewed from the pictographic characters are the reason for 90% of Chinese characters. It is true that the pictophmetic characters contain phonetic elements, but the phonetic symbols of pictophmetic characters are not special phonetic symbols, but characters created by means of pictograph, understanding and pointing things, and there are a lot of them. The use of more than one character for a sound is very common, and the use of one character for several sounds is equally common. At the same time, because of the contradiction between the change of pronunciation and the lag of the change of text, many phonemes now lose the function of phonetic. There are two pictographic features "table sound rate" statistics, Zhou Youguang "Chinese phonetic sound check" on the "Xinhua Dictionary" (1971 edition) of the word statistics, modern Chinese phonetic effective table sound rate is 39%. Have other scholars to the most commonly used 3000 words (according to the Chinese character reform committee, national bureau of standards. "what are the most commonly used Chinese characters - three thousand high frequency word table of Chinese

characters) of pictophmetic characters is also made a sound statistic, the results are as follows:" pictophmetic characters, a total of 2294 words, the representation and the harmonic system and full with 579 words, accounted for 25.24%; 348 Chinese characters with the varying tones and equal rhyme, accounting for 15.17%; The accumulative total accounts for 40.41%. In other words, only 40 per cent of the words were likely to be "half right". Therefore, it is not advisable to identify Chinese characters as phonetic characters only from the perspective of pictographic characters.

2.3. The Meaning-phonetic Characters Theory

Qiu Xikui and Zhou Youguang believe that Chinese characters are meaning-phonetic characters. Zhou Youguang believes that "the characters that use both ideographic and phonetic expressions can be called 'meaning-phonetic characters'. Chinese characters are one of the meaning-phonetic characters." [7] Mr. Zhou thinks that the emergence of meaning-phonetic characters is the greatest stride of the writing system. It takes up a significant step in characters' evolution. The characters of ideographic system are the beginning of the history of written records.

Qiu Xikui mainly studies the early characters and put forward that Chinese characters were "meaning-phonetic characters" which has undergone certain evolution. Mr. Qiu's analysis of Chinese characters' nature is as follows: in the early stage of high pictographic level, Chinese characters are basically a system of characters using ideograms and notes. After, with the alterations in the shape, pronunciation and signification of the characters, it gradually evolves into a character system using ideograms, notes and marks. If it is necessary to put names on the two stages of Chinese characters, the former seems to be called the ideogram note character, or, as Chinese characters' a quantity of scholars have done, abbreviated to ideophonetic characters. The latter seems to be called ideogram and note mark. Taking into account that the symbols in Chinese characters' later stage are nearly modified by notes and ideographs, and most Chinese characters are even composed of notes and ideograms, the Chinese characters in this stage can also be called the later ideographic note characters or ideophonetic characters [8].

Mr. Zhou Youguang's opinions are very enlightening to us. He puts Chinese characters in the international background and studies their position in the history of the development of world characters. He believes that Chinese characters and many characters belong to the same category, such as cuneiform script, Hieroglyphics, etc. This kind of writing uses phonetic and ideographic methods to express language, so they are a sort of ideogram. This conclusion is scientific and reasonable. As regards the theory advanced by Mr. Qiu Xikui, his theory of distinguishing two levels of symbols is of guiding significance to the study of the structure of Chinese characters. As stated by Chinese characters' interior constitution, it is scientific to define Chinese characters as ideophonetic characters. It is worth mentioning that he divided the historical development of Chinese characters over 3000 years into two stages and pointed out the differences in the internal structure of Chinese characters, which gave a profounder apprehension of Chinese characters to us.

2.4. The Word Writing Theory and The Morpheme-writing Theory

The concept of word writing is first put forward by American linguist Bloomfield. He puts forward in *The Language* that "every word in spoken language is represented by a symbol. Such a writing system is the so-called ideograph, which is a name easily misunderstood. The important feature of characters is that characters do not represent the characteristics of the real world ("ideas") but the characteristics of the language of the writer. Therefore, it is better to call them word writing or logographic writing." [9]

Later in the 1950s, morpheme writing's concept was firstly suggested by Mr. Zhao Yuanren. "The most important example of writing a morpheme in a literal unit is the Chinese character,''he said.[10]

To sum up, Zhao Yuanren and Bloomfield hold the same views on both the epigraph and morpheme characters. Although the terms used are different, the criteria are wholly the same, both in terms of the language units recorded in Chinese characters. The unit of language used in the word writing theory is words, while the unit of language used in the morpheme-writing theory is the morpheme. In modern Chinese, the majority is occupied by disyllabic words, and a morpheme is recorded by a Chinese character basically. Therefore, the theory of morpheme writing can be regarded as the development of the theory of expressing words. However, a quantity of words in modernistic Chinese are commonly composed of one morpheme, but they are disyllabic or polysyllabic. For example: 蝴蝶（hú dié）,忐忑（tǎn tè）,葡萄（pú táo）etc. At this time, one syllable is recorded only by a Chinese character usually rather than a morpheme.

However, the theory of expressing words is a little one-sided. After all, an unequal comparison is made by scholars between Chinese characters and other characters, so it appears to be a little inadequate. After the theory of morpheme is put forward, many domestic scholars agree with it. Mr. Lu Shuxiang thinks that "the third type of writing is a morpheme characters, its unit is a character, not a letter, and the character is significant. Chinese characters are the representative and only representative of this kind of writing. All characters other than Chinese characters are solely the combination of sound and form, and exclusively Chinese characters are the combination of sound, meaning and form. Su Peicheng also says: "Chinese's morpheme is recorded by Chinese characters' single character, so Chinese characters are morpheme characters, which is Chinese characters' nature." To sum up, the above viewpoints also prove the reliability of the theory of morpheme writing.

3. CONCLUSION

On Chinese characters' nature, some scholars concentrate on the features of Chinese characters themselves, in other words, the relation between the form, sound and meaning of Chinese characters; some people have put forward "ideophonetic characters" by focusing on the main part of Chinese characters, that is, pictophonetic characters' structural roles; while some scholars advocate that the language units recorded by Chinese characters should be discussed at the linguistic level, so there are theories of "word writing" and "morpheme characters".

Although there are some representative theories about the nature of Chinese characters, there is no convincing and faultless conclusion. The main reason for this situation is that different scholars take different angles, and the right angle has not been found by a lot of scholars to study Chinese characters' nature.

Many theories are open to discussion. For example, the theory of ideophonetic characters is proposed based on the structure and function of pictophonetic characters. That is to say, it is based on the most important role of Chinese characters. The pictophonetic characters in Chinese characters use pictophonetic symbols to express meaning and phonetic symbols to express pronunciation.

Another example is that there are some deficiencies in theory between the theory of words and morpheme characters. The idea that Chinese characters are words is to compare the letters of Chinese characters and Western Pinyin characters, and this contrast is obviously not equal. Using tens of thousands of Chinese characters to compare 26 letters is bound to draw wrong conclusions. Although the theory of morpheme writing objectively reflects the feature of a morpheme in the general recording language of modern Chinese characters, it has no difference in nature from the theory of expressing words. It is difficult to establish the theory that the nature of Chinese characters is determined by the changes of ancient and modern Chinese. [11]

To sum up, in fact, Chinese characters can have different properties from multiple perspectives. From the perspective of word selection and sentence making, Chinese characters are ideophonetic characters with semantic structure and phonetic meaning; from the viewpoint of putting methods down, they are also single syllable morpheme characters with square shape. In the growth of Chinese characters for thousands of years, individual characters' figure has altered more or less. But generally speaking, the formation principle of Chinese characters has always been based on the meaning of language, and has never changed. From this point of view, although a hundred schools of thought contend, it seems that the best way to sum up the essential characteristics of Chinese characters is to regard Chinese characters as ideographic characters. Though Chinese characters hold phonetic elements, they cannot fundamentally change the ideographic nature of Chinese characters. Due to Chinese characters' unique characteristics, we should not only analyze the nature of Chinese characters from the synchronic point of view, but also analyze the nature of Chinese characters objectively from the point of view of common time.

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