

# Why the Emperor Qin Shi Huang Took “ZHEN” as the First Exclusive Person Pronoun of the Emperors

Yanmei Zhang

College of Liberal Arts  
South China Normal University  
Guangzhou, China  
School of Foreign Language  
Guilin University of Electronic Technology  
Guilin, China

Lingzhi Zhang

Overseas Education College  
Xiamen University  
Xiamen, China

Han Ding

School of Foreign Language  
Guilin University of Electronic Technology  
Guilin, China

Yongping Luo

Research Center for Language and Language Education  
Central China Normal University  
Wuhan, China

**Abstract**—This article gives a brief introduction to relevant discussions from writings of domestic China of the issue that why the emperor Qin Shi Huang took “ZHEN” as the first exclusive person pronoun of the emperors. Meanwhile, it indicates the most fundamental and essential reason is that, starting from the oracle, “ZHEN” is normally used by princes, ministers and other nobles or men of noble status. Other relevant discussions seeing from the main articles of why Qin Shi Huang claimed himself with “ZHEN” in China now point “the most common syntactic function of ‘ZHEN’ was as an attributive” and ‘ZHEN’ is an ancient word with quaint and solemn expressive meaning.” In fact, these secondary reasons mentioned above are closely and directly related to the referential meaning of “ZHEN”.

**Keywords**—the Emperor Qin Shi Huang; “ZHEN”; the first person pronoun

## I. INTRODUCTION

After Qin Shi Huang unified the whole country, he adopted the advice of prime minister Wang Wan, the imperial censor Feng Jie and military rank Li Si, anointing “ZHEN(朕)” as the first exclusive person pronoun. Since then, until the late Qing dynasty, the emperor had always claimed himself “ZHEN” and others could not use. In fact, the first person pronoun appeared in ancient Chinese literatures which have different kinds of statements such as “wo (我)”, “wu (吾)”, “yu (余)”, “yu (予)”, “ang (昂)” and “tai (台)”. Here comes the question that among the first person pronouns in ancient Chinese, why does Qin Shi Huang only chose “ZHEN” as his private first person pronoun?

## II. RELEVANT DISCUSSIONS ABOUT WHY QIN SHI HUANG CLAIMED HIMSELF WITH “ZHEN (朕)”

There are mainly three articles in China now concerning the discussions of Why Qin Shi Huang claimed himself with “ZHEN”. The first article, The Syntactic Function of the First Person Pronoun “ZHEN” in Ancient Chinese (Yanmei Zhang, 2016), indicated that some relations probably exist between the syntactic function of “ZHEN” and it used exclusively by Qin Shi Huang. Seeing from the syntactic function of “ZHEN”, it was most commonly used as an attributive (translated as “my”). Over the Western Zhou Dynasty and the Spring and Autumn Period, the emperors, princes, ministers and other nobles normally used ways of bronze casting in ancestor worship, recognition of merit or record of events. When it comes to those venerated and awestruck ancestors, the pronoun “ZHEN” was commonly used as an attributive.

For instance, in the 360-character bronze inscriptions of the Western Zhou Dynasty – Lai Pan unearthed in Baoji, Shanxi province in 2003, there were five places referring to “ZHEN Huang Gao Zu”( my honored great-grandfather), one place referring to “ZHEN Huang Ya Zu”( my honored grandfather), one place referring to “ZHEN Huang Kao” (my late honored father), two places referring to “ZHEN Huang Zu Kao”(my honored ancestors and late father). The emperors, princes, ministers and other nobles claimed with “ZHEN” made people feel that the word itself has an exalted meaning. For its exalted meaning, it should not be strange that the first person pronoun “ZHEN” was used exclusively by the emperors later.

There are other two articles especially devoted to the issue that why Qin Shi Huang used “ZHEN” as the first exclusive person pronoun of the emperors:

- First of all, Yujin Zhang (2003) had an article Why Qin Shi Huang claimed himself with “ZHEN”, putting forward to four reasons: Initially, “ZHEN” had disappeared in the oral Chinese during the late Warring States Period, so choosing this word would not affect public communication and let the public offend taboo.
- Secondly, although “ZHEN” disappeared in the spoken language, it can also be seen in written forms. Thus, it can be the selected object. Thirdly, “ZHEN” was an ancient word with quaint and solemn expressive meaning in Spring and Autumn Warring States Period ; One of the reasons that why “ZHEN” was select is the ancient word has its unique color sense.
- Finally, “ZHEN” is used as the first person pronoun. Moreover, Xue Lai (2012) also wrote The New Investigation of “ZHEN” used by Qin Shi Huang. During the discussion, he developed different views from Yujin Zhang. He held the view that regarding the first person singular as the reason why Qin Shi Huang used “ZHEN” as his claim failed to establish. Besides, he considered that since the Qin dynasty, Qin Shi Huang only chose “ZHEN” as an exclusive appellation. It not only based on the class background that, “ZHEN” was used as self-claim during the pre-Qin historical literature, but also connected with the historical and cultural significance of oracle shape of ZHEN. But the article also mentioned that some scholars like Huizhan Chen did not agree with the view that parts of oracle shape of “ZHEN” are related to power.

Although two articles deal with different points of view, it also inspires our thinking: Among the first-person pronouns in ancient Chinese, what made Qin Shi Huang only choose “ZHEN” for the first exclusive person pronoun? If there are a variety of reasons, then which is the most fundamental and essential one?

### III. THE DISCUSSION OF WHY QIN SHI HUANG USED “ZHEN” WHEN SELF-CLAIMED

We consider that the view of Yujin Zhang about why Qin Shi Huang used “ZHEN” when self-claimed. For instance, the ancient word “ZHEN” has a quaint, solemn expressive meaning and “ZHEN” is commonly used in the first person singular, have a point. On the other hand, the word “ZHEN” is quaint and Solemn,; Of course, it is related to the process that “ZHEN” transformed from colloquial to written style, and although “ZHEN” enjoys a low use rate in oral language, it still exists in written language as Mr. Zhang pointed out. Moreover, it should also be based on the truth that “ZHEN” was often used in ancient Chinese when the emperor of Shang Dynasty did divination or the supreme ruler gave imperial edict. It is also used before the appellation of the respectable forefathers.

In addition, as “ZHEN” is commonly used in the first person singular, we can hardly imagine that Qin Shi Huang

would choose a commonly used word in the plural (“we”). It should be noted that the statement of Yujin Zhang in the text referring to “ZHEN” is, “‘ZHEN’ is always used as a singular first person pronoun.” “‘ZHEN’ is very common in oracles of the Yin Dynasty ruins, used as the first person pronoun in singular.” Although some scholars like Xianpei Xia (1986), Zhenwu Yao (2015) later pointed out that “ZHEN” can also be used in the plural or both in plurality and singularity, we should not criticize severely on researches of previous experts and scholars on the “ZHEN” used in the singular. Neither can we base on this judgment and deny the correlation between “ZHEN” commonly used in the first person singular and why Qin Shi Huang took “ZHEN” as the emperors’ exclusive appellation.

However, we consider that “ZHEN” has a quaint, solemnly expression meaning and it is commonly used in the first person singular. It does not seem to be the fundamental cause that why Emperor Qin Shi Huang took “ZHEN” as the first exclusive person pronoun. As is mentioned in the second reason of Mr. Zhang’s article, it should be the most fundamental and important reason that the imperial edicts of Zhou emperor often used “ZHEN” when declaring. As Yujin Zhang says, “this is a very important reason for “ZHEN” being elected”. During the period of the Spring and Autumn, although Zhou emperor was the nominal ruler of the country, he did not have the right to order the world. However, he usually announced the order by using the identity of emperor, with “ZHEN” in the imperial edicts. Qin Shi Huang, using “ZHEN” to call himself, should be regarded as a continuation that the Emperor of Zhou Dynasty used “ZHEN” as a self-proclaimed word. In addition, according to our investigation, there were mainly several following situations used “Zhen” in Pre Qin Dynasty:

- Firstly, seeing from Oracle bone inscriptions during the Yin Shang period, sentences used “ZHEN” were mostly the records of augury by the Shang emperor. Secondly, “ZHEN” was often utilized in the ancient emperors’ conversations or edicts. For example, in the legend, when the elder Emperor Yao held a tribal alliance council to abdicate and consult candidates with the tribal leaders, he used “ZHEN”; When Emperor Shun appointed ministers “Yi” and “Long”, he used “ZHEN”; When the king of Shang addressed, conversed and issued orders, he used “ZHEN”; When the Zhou emperor issued edicts, he used “ZHEN” as well. In addition, there existed the situation that other people claimed themselves with “ZHEN” except the emperor, but it is normally used by princes, ministers and other nobles or men of noble status. For example, in the Western Zhou Dynasty and bronze inscriptions of the Spring and Autumn Period, emperors, princes, ministers and other nobles normally used ways of bronze casting in ancestor worship, recognition of merit or record of events. When mentioned their ancestors, they often claimed themselves with “ZHEN”, that is to say, “ZHEN” could be used among people in addition to the emperor. As another example, Qu Yuan claimed himself with “ZHEN” in The Songs of Chu during

the Warring States Period. The first sentence in Li Sao (The Lament) of The Songs of Chu is that "Of the god-king Gayang, I am the far offspring; the name of my late honored sire bore is Boyong." ("ZHEN Huang Kao" means "my late honored father").

- In summary, not ordinary people were allowed to claim himself with "ZHEN" before Qin Shi Huang. It can also explain that among first person pronouns of the ancient Chinese, why did "ZHEN" have been used exclusively by the emperors from the Qin Dynasty, but not "WO(我)", "WU(吾)", "YU(予)" and "YU(余)" and another first person pronouns. Augured by the Shang emperor and the legendary emperors, Shang emperor and emperor of Zhou claimed with "ZHEN" in the edicts and the conversations. Although there existed the situation that claimed with "ZHEN" by other people instead of the emperors, it was normally used by princes, ministers and other nobles or men of noble status, so Qin Shin Huang used it as the first exclusive person pronoun of the emperors logically. The article, The New Investigation of "ZHEN" used by Qin Shi Huang from Xue Lai (2012) held the view that since the Qin dynasty, Qin Shi Huang only chose "ZHEN" as an exclusive appellation, based on the class background that during the pre-Qin historical literature. He merely did not elaborate that it was normally used by princes, ministers and other nobles or men of noble status, though there existed the situation that claim with "ZHEN" by other people except the emperor. Neither did he carefully investigate the underlying fundamental reasons that "ZHEN" is an ancient word with quaint and solemn expressive meaning" as a reason when Qin Shi Huang claiming himself from Mr. Yujin Zhang.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Of course, there may be other unknown reasons that Qin Shin Huang used "ZHEN" as the exclusive first person pronoun of the emperors; perhaps a variety of reasons coexist. However, we believe that the most fundamental and essential reason is that, starting from the oracle, "ZHEN" was normally used by princes, ministers and other nobles or men of noble status. Especially before Qin Shi Huang unified the whole country, the emperor of Zhou, the nominally supreme ruler of Huaxia (an ancient name for China) still used it when issuing the edicts. It can be said to be a continuation of the ancient emperors, Shang emperor and the emperor of Zhou claiming with "ZHEN". However, there are mainly three articles in domestic China now concerning the discussions of Why Qin Shi Huang claimed with "ZHEN". For example, The Syntactic Function of the First Person Pronoun "ZHEN" in Ancient Chinese (Yanmei Zhang, 2016), indicated that some relations probably existed between the syntactic function of "ZHEN" and why it was used exclusively by Qin Shi Huang. And the article Why Qin Shi Huang claimed with "ZHEN" of Yujin Zhang (2003) put forward one reason that "ZHEN" is an ancient word with quaint and solemn expressive meaning. Xue Lai (2012) also

wrote The New Investigation of "ZHEN" used by Qin Shi Huang. He held the view that since the Qin dynasty, Qin Shi Huang only chose "ZHEN" as an exclusive appellation, based on the class background that during the pre-Qin historical literature. In fact, it is closely and directly related to the referential meaning of "ZHEN".

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research was financially supported by three projects. The initial one was the Project of Undergraduate Teaching Reform of Higher Education in Guangxi in 2016, with the project index number 2016JGA198, in which the content was the reform and research of "practical teaching" of International Chinese Education Specialty on the base of universities personnel training in Guangxi. Besides, the Planning Project of Social Science in Fujian Province has the project index number 2012B037, containing the Development Strategy Research of Confucius Institute. It was also supported by the Project of Teaching Reform in Guilin University of Electronic Technology (The cultivation and practice of teaching and research abilities for undergraduates of International Chinese Education Specialty in micro-lecture era: taking the curriculums of Chinese culture as examples, having the project index number ZJW14127).

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Yanmei Zhang. The Syntactic Function of the First Person Pronoun "ZHEN" in Ancient Chinese. [J]. Modern Chinese (Language Research Edition), 2016, 06.
- [2] Yujin Zhang. Why Qin Shi Huang Claimed with "ZHEN" [J]. Monthly Chinese Language, 2003, 03:37-38.
- [3] Lai Xue. The New Investigation of "ZHEN" Used by Qin Shi Huang [J]. Journal of Chongqing Jiaotong University (Social Sciences Edition), 2012, 03:77-79.
- [4] Xianpei Xia. A Preliminary Study of the Relationship Between the Pre-Qin First Person Pronouns, "YU", "ZHEN", "WO" and "WU" [J]. Journal of Changsha University of Science & Technology (Social Sciences Edition), 1986, 02:135-141.
- [5] Zhenwu Yao. The Morphological Phenomenon and Relevant Reflections of the First Person Pronouns in Ancient Chinese [J]. Journal of Hubei University (Philosophy and Social Science), 2015, 01:76-81+147.