



The Research Overview of Variant Chinese Characters

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Abstract

Considering the fact that the nature of Chinese characters determines the time-honored history and complexity of variant Chinese characters, the research on variant Chinese characters has been recognized as an important part in Chinese characters studies. From the historical perspective, the relevant researches are mainly manifested by the re-sorting out of various characteristic patterns but plagued by the scarce cohort study of variant Chinese characters and insufficient in-depth understanding and explanation of the reason for this phenomenon.

Key words: Variant Chinese characters; Ancient writing; Formation evolution

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INTRODUCTION

Chinese characters have long been regarded as ideography, and most of the oracle bone inscriptions, the earliest form of Chinese characters that has been found so far, was used to record Chinese words by depicting the images of the objects. In this process, either the overall image or local features of object is depicted; or different objects, symbols and methods of objects are chosen to express the abstract conception. The details differences

of writing also give rise to the common phenomenon of variant Chinese characters at the initial stage when the Chinese characters came into being. The tens of thousands of variant Chinese characters in the historical documents, for one thing, display the condition of the development and change of Chinese characters and for another, bring enormous trouble and difficulty to literature of interpretation. Therefore, the research on variant Chinese characters serves as an indispensable part in studies of Chinese characters.

1. REVIEW AND STUDY OF THE CHINESE VARIANT CHARACTERS IN ANCIENT CHINA

The Chinese variant characters have long been noticed by the ancient Chinese scholars. The annotation of literature and the explanations in ancient books of Han Dynasty have expounded on this point. *Shuo Wen Jie Zi*, written by Xu Shen in the Han Dynasty, include 9,353 official seal characters and 1,163 Chinese variant characters. It is generally believed as the first collection and review of Chinese variant characters in history. Since then, from Wei Dynasty to Qing Dynasty, some wordbooks and dictionaries also re-sorting out the Chinese variant characters, but left disordered appellation and different styles. In spite of the fact that some books studying the orthography and correcting the folk and mistaken characters are also associated with the research on Chinese variant characters, it is simply restricted to the processing of the specific materials. In brief, the scholars in ancient China failed to clearly define the Chinese variant characters, or summarize and theoretically elaborate on the rules of their formation and development. Therefore, in their explanations, they confused the Chinese variant characters with interchangeable words, cognate words, ancient and modern words, secular

characters and auxiliary without a fundamental distinction between them.

2. THE DEFINITION OF CHINESE VARIANT CHARACTERS BY MODERN SCHOLARS

It was not until the 1950s that the term of “Chinese variant characters” came into use and the systematic and in-depth theoretical analysis began. Around this period of time, the linguistic circle concentrated on the discussion of the definition and review method of Chinese variant characters; however, there were still disputes over the definition of Chinese variant characters, as evidenced by the numerous papers, monographs and textbooks in this regard. However, the most representative ones are listed as follows:

a) The variant characters mean the different way of writing the same character. Only two or more character forms with completely same pronunciation and meaning can be called the variant of a character (Lü, 1980).

b) Two (or more) characters with the same meaning could replace each other under any circumstance (Wang, 1962).

c) The Chinese variant characters refer to those with the same pronunciation and meaning but different writing form. Strictly speaking, only the characters with the same usage, or the variants of one character, could be called the Chinese variant characters. However, the alleged variant characters usually only include the characters with partial same usage. The variant characters proper is called the narrow-sense variant characters and the characters with partial same usage called partial variant characters; both of them compose the broad-sense variant characters (Qiu, 1988).

d) The Chinese variant characters refer to those created by people with different character forms but the same meaning, which could replace each other (Jiang, 1989).

e) From the perspective of the relationship between character symbol and words, two or more character symbols which are used to record the same character could be called the Chinese variant characters (Liu, 1990).

f) The Chinese variant characters refer to the different forms created for one word with completely same pronunciation and meaning but without any derivation in use (Li, 2004).

g) The Chinese variant characters have two meanings: first, the characters with different forms but the same pronunciation and meanings are called variant characters; second, different from the standardized form of Chinese characters in forms, the variant characters have the same pronunciation and meaning with the standardized form (Su, 1994).

h) In broad sense, the Chinese variant characters refer to the comparison between the modern characters and

ancient characters. The narrow-sense variant characters refer to those within the same times (Jiang, 1994).

Due to the different research objectives and subjects, there are disputes over the aforesaid statements. First, the difference between the ancient and modern characters should be eliminated with respect to the definition of Chinese variant characters. According to the definition by Mr. Jiang Shanguo, the “broad-sense variant characters” refers to the comparison between modern characters and ancient ones and between li calligraphy and regular script. However, the inclusion of the differences between the ancient and modern characters, such as seal scripts, li calligraphy, regular script, semi-cursive handwriting and cursive handwriting will influence the investigation of the essence of variant characters.

With the differences in the style of calligraphy excluded, the linguistic circles still have two disagreements with the definition of Chinese variant characters: a) Whether the Chinese variant characters are the same characters with different forms or the same phrases with different forms; b) Whether the Chinese variant characters should have partially or completely same pronunciation and meaning. These two disagreements involve the essential understanding of the Chinese variant characters.

Li Guoying held the idea that whether recording the same word isn't the essential nature of Chinese variant characters, but we should definite it from whether they are the same character. The alleged “same character” and “different character” are distinguished in accordance with the two standards of formation origin and functions.

Those created for the same word in language without functional differentiation in usage belong to the “same character relationship”; those created for different words or for the same word but with functional differentiation in usage belong to the “different character relationship”; graphological deviation the variant characters to the “same character with different forms” (Li, 2004)

and defined the Chinese variant characters as the different character forms created for the same word without functional differentiation in usage or the different forms of the same character caused by graphological deviation. However, Mr. Li viewed the Chinese variant characters simply from the perspective of review of modern Chinese characters. It is worth-noticing that the differentiation won't be taken into account from the synchronic approach of cohort study of language; instead, under such circumstance, it shall simply taken into consideration whether the character is created for the same word or it is the original meaning of the character. As both the Chinese characters and relationships between Chinese characters and words are subject to the dynamic development, some characters, which originally have variant relationships, have their own specialized roles and became different characters due to semantic differentiation and reallocation;

however, the Chinese characters, which originally do not have variant relationships, will re-establish their variant relationship at a certain historical stage for various reasons (original and interchangeable characters, ancient and modern characters). It is believed that the definition of variant characters must take into account the factors of times from the perspectives of relationship between form and meaning in coinage as well as the Chinese character usage relationship of diachrony; however, the variant character is, in principle, a synchronic phenomenon. The variant characters proper are inevitably the same in both pronunciation and meaning. However, the strict and free distinction of variant characters within the academic circles is determined by the practice of confirming the Chinese variant characters. Lü Yongjin thought that

Only by transferring the character symbols and the unit recorded from the traditional “lexical sense” to “word sense”, the explanation of the variant relationship within the “broad-sense” Chinese variant characters can be avoided so as to set up the direct relationship between the character symbols and word sense with simple expression of meaning. The number of character symbols recording the corresponding word sense equals to the number of Chinese variant characters in this word sense. (Lü, 2004)

Mao Yuanming (2012) also agreed that “the discussion about the non-identical Chinese variant characters shall take the glosseme of the recorded words as the unit rather than the whole word corresponding with the characters; or it will be perplexing.” Li Yunfu (2006) remarked that

The statement about the Chinese variant characters made by those advocating the “strict distinction” was simply a theoretical presupposition. If the cases of the practical use of variant characters were concluded, there are, in fact, few variant characters with “completely the same” “absolutely the same” pronunciation and meaning. The so-called “mutually replaceable” is also an approach for the researchers and literature reviewers; the users, however, only choose instead of replacing the variant characters. The selection of variant characters will be subject to the influence of many factors, such as the personal cultural quality and customary usage of Chinese characters, the social awareness of fashion and standardization of Chinese characters usage, the special environment and purpose of usage; for this reason, even the usage of typical Chinese variant characters is susceptible to differences. For example, Chinese character A has recorded 5 word senses but B only has recorded 2, or A originated from the Pre-Qin Dynasty but B from the period of two Han dynasties; under such circumstances, their actual tone values have been different from each other due to the phonetic changes during this period of time. Even at the same time, the use of Chinese variant characters the actual pronunciation and meaning they carry are not identical for different users or readers. Even the lexicography dictionaries differ from each other with respect to their phonetic notation of the Chinese variant characters.

The above-mentioned discussions have taken full note of the complicated relationships between Chinese characters and words and usage of Chinese characters; therefore, the definition of Chinese variant characters based on glosseme or word sense is more favorable to the overall mastery

and detailed analysis of the Chinese variant characters. Therefore, the complete similarity of pronunciation and meaning is a comparative standard. It is advisable to apply the universally recognized archaic Chinese phonology system to pronunciation and the similarity on a certain glossed to mean.

In conclusion, the relations between form and meaning of Chinese characters serve as the basis for the definition of Chinese variant characters. The character patterns at the same sememe on a certain synchronic plane with association could be regarded as the variant relation. The variant characters are created for the same word on the synchronic plane or recorded for the different character forms of the same word because of the association in their character forms (including the different patterns of a character caused by writing deviation); it could also be said that the Chinese variant characters include a group of different character forms recording the same word but exclude the phonetic loan characters .

3. REVIEW AND STUDIES OF CHINESE VARIANT CHARACTERS BY MODERN SCHOLARS

3.1 Review and Studies of Modern Chinese Variant Characters

Modern Chinese characters originate from the Li calligraphy of Han dynasty. Due to the demands for the reform of writing system after the establishment of the new China, the modern Chinese variant characters were reviewed in 1953 with the *Draft of Scheme for Simplifying Chinese Characters* (attached with the *Draft of the List of Chinese Variant Characters to be Abolished*) drawn up in 1954 and the *First Batch of Tabulated Variant Forms of Chinese Characters* officially published in 1955. This review determined the standardized forms of simplified Chinese characters, elaborating on the definition of variant characters and standardizing the selection and use of variant characters.

3.2 The Review and Studies of Ancient Chinese Variant Characters

3.2.1 Review of the Pattern of Chinese Variant Characters

At the initial stage, the studies of ancient characters mainly focused on the characters elucidation; on this basis, the academic circles compiled a batch of dictionaries and character collections, including the oracle bones, bronze and stone tablet, bambooslips and silk, seal and coins. Representative character patterns are enumerated under the prefix, an attempt that could be rated as the preliminary review of the ancient Chinese variant characters. The System for Chinese Variant Characters compiled by Liu Zhiji included two volumes,

namely, *Compilation of Seal Scripts* and *Compilation of Li Calligraphy*; among which, the “seal scripts” refer to the ancient characters. At the meantime, under the prefix, he also listed the major variant character patterns used in the ancient characters of pre-Qin period. Character collection, as an ancient way of character compilation, simply arranged some of the character patterns together in accordance with a certain compilation mode (such as pronunciation or radical) without any explanation of the character pattern and meaning; however, it is worth-noticing that the research achievements have been included into the determination of character model and incorporation of character patterns. In this sense, it is of prime importance to integrate the latest research achievements of the times into a good character collection.

3.2.2 The Theory Construction of the Research on Chinese Variant Characters

Despite the insufficient research theories pertaining to ancient characters, the studies of ancient characters still involved the explanation and illustration of Chinese variant characters. In *Introduction to Paleography* (1935) and *Chinese Characters Study* (1949), Tang Lan established the theoretical framework for Chinese Character Study for the first time in history, generalizing the characters of simplification and adding of Chinese characters and proposing the their evolution phenomenon, such as phoneticization, abbreviation change, upside down, mirror writing and assimilation; some of which were reflected by the Chinese variant characters. Under the influence of Tang Lan, scholars began to conduct more in-depth and detailed research on the arrangement of ancient Chinese characters. The warring states script, in particular, received the earliest attention for the complicated changes of character forms. In the *Evolution of Forms of Warring States Script*, the fourth chapter of the *General Theory of Warring States Script*, He Linyi summarized the five rules for the evolution of the forms of warring states script, including simplification, complexity, foreignization, domestication and special symbols. These five rules involve as many as 39 changes in strokes and radicals of Chinese characters. Zhang Zhenlin, Zhang Guiguang, Wu Zhengang, Liu Zhao and Wei Yihui have also offered monographic study of the simplification, complexity, phonetic component, redundant stroke, decorative stroke, stroke loan, corruption, analogization and mix by means of various materials because these formation rules serve as the important characteristics of the development and evolution of Chinese characters and the major factors for the formation of Chinese variant characters. Wang Ning (2002) proposed to differentiate the variant characters into two levels, different writing character and heterogeneous character. Hu Zhiming (2010) and Liu Yun (2012) also carried out classified description of the warring states in script with these rules.

Above all, the comparatively developed formation theory has been set up for the research on ancient Chinese characters; under which, extensive research has been conducted on a variety of ancient written materials with achievements achieved in character elucidation, as evidenced by the publishing of a large number of character collections and the refined studies of Chinese character formation. At the meantime, the evolution features of Chinese characters concluded has also been made an important part of the research on Chinese variant characters.

4. THE DEFICIENCIES OF RESEARCH ON CHINESE VARIANT CHARACTERS

4.1 The Deficiencies of Monographic Cohort Study

Although there are plentiful papers and works associated with the cohort study of ancient Chinese characters, the cohort study of Chinese variant characters still remains scarce; the existing studies are simply restricted to war states script. The ancient Chinese characters, from oracle bone inscription to li calligraphy of Qin and Han Dynasties, boast diversified carriers and fickle character patterns. As the characters in each material and of different times also contain tremendous variant characters with considerable forms, it is demanding to conduct monographic cohort study.

4.2 A Lack of Quantitative Analysis and In-Depth Qualitative Analysis

No one else except Chen Tingzhu (2007) and Zhang Zaixing (2004) has ever conducted measurable analysis of Chinese variant characters; instead, they simply gave examples so as to illustrate the variant characters. Without quantitative analysis, it is impossible to convincingly explain the usage conditions and evolution of the different forms of the same character at each development stage.

With respect to qualitative analysis, although scholars have generalized several manifestation modes of Chinese variant characters but failed to offer deep explanation of the internal motive for these presentations. It is obvious that such explanation is enormously difficult; the further progress in this regard could be achieved only by combining the study of history and culture, cognitive study and the study of expression of thinking.

4.3 Insufficient Diachronic Research

Chinese variant character is essentially a synchronic concept. In light of the dynamic development of Chinese characters, the adjustment of relationships between Chinese characters and words and characters differentiation, the variant relationship is also under change. Generated through gradual change, most of the

variant characters are placed in the historical course of constant creation and extinction. The alleged diachronic research refers to the studies of the inheritance and evolution of the Chinese variant characters, for example, oracle bone inscriptions of Shang Dynasty and inscriptions on ancient bronze objects of Western Zhou Dynasty within a relatively closed hundreds of years at a certain synchronic level rather than the comparative studies of Chinese characters, such as oracle bone inscriptions, inscriptions on ancient bronze objects, seal characters and li calligraphy. By doing so, it could clearly outline the cause and effect of various characteristic patterns and their trajectories of change.

In conclusion, the research on Chinese variant characters is of prime importance to standardize Chinese characters, understand the relation between form and meaning, interpret the knotty Chinese characters, fathom the meaning of words, gain a mastery over the rules for the development and evolution of Chinese characters and enrich the theories of philology; it is crucial to conduct more in-depth monographic research on Chinese variant

characters, especially the research on ancient Chinese characters.

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