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CONTENTS

The Study Of "Mei" (美) From the Perspective of Archaeological Evidences

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Abstract

The Chinese character "mei"(美) carries out the meaning of beauty in Chinese, but "mei" in Chinese oracle bone inscriptions (甲骨文) and Chinese bronze inscriptions (金文) do not reflect the meaning of beauty as it basically related to the names of places and the names of people only. The East Han dynasty, Shuowen Jiezi (《说文解字》) had denoted the meaning of "mei" as sweetness (甘), but there are still lots of arguments concerning the meaning of this Chinese character "mei" until now. Besides, the creation of the Chinese character "mei" (美) is a topic that has been explored by many researchers and scholars which resulted in various interpretation of the character by them. The archaeological evidences were presented as focuses of discussion. It is hoped that the discussion of this paper is able to contribute to the teaching and learning of pure Chinese linguistics courses such as semantics, ancient Chinese studies and related courses.

Keywords："mei"(美), oracle bone inscriptions, bronze inscriptions, creation of Chinese character

Introduction

The Chinese character "mei"(美) is popularly carried the meaning of beauty in Chinese. Whilst the ancient dictionary during the East Han dynasty, Shuowen Jiezi (《说文解字》), which gave explanation of Chinese characters, has denoted the meaning of mei as sweetness（甘）(Xu, 1977, pp.78a). However, there are lots of arguments concerning the meaning of this Chinese character "mei". In this article, the morphology as well as the semantics of "mei" will be discussed in the light of ancient Chinese characters study, etymology and other related aspects with the prime focus of providing ample archaeological evidences.

MORPHOLOGY AND SEMANTICS OF "MEI" BASED ON THE ASPECT OF ETYMOLOGY

According to Rong (1985, pp.24), the study of etymology of Chinese characters could trace back to the study of the Chinese oracle bone inscriptions (甲骨文) and Chinese bronze inscriptions (金文). According to Shang (2000, pp.123), on the Yinxu, ruins of the Yinshang, "mei" appeared as the horns of goats (shown in Table 1, no. 3) and in the shape of pincers (shown in Table 1, no. 4). There were even more forms of "mei" in these Chinese bronze inscriptions (金文) as shown in Table 1 (Rong, 1985, pp.262). The shapes of the horns of goats were very obvious in these forms of "mei" (Yu, 1963, pp.49). While for the shapes of "mei" in the inscription of ancient pottery (陶文) (refer to table 1), the fethered embroidery in oracle bone inscriptions (甲骨文) has started to disappear (Gao & Ge, 1991, pp.191). The upper part of "mei" (美) is very similar to the upper of goat "yang" (羊).For the inscriptions on the royal or official seal (玺文), it was found that the forms of "mei" did not transform to the shape of goat "yang" (羊) as appeared in the inscription of ancient pottery (陶文) (refer to table 1) as reported by Luo (1981, pp.87).

In the inscriptions of "mei" in State of Chu (circa 1030–223 BC) (楚系文字) would not be discussed in detail because they were the different writing forms of "mei". While the inscriptions of "mei" on the

bamboo slips which were joined together to form the whole scrolls (竹简), such as and were very similar to the writing of "mei" (美) in the lesser seal character (小篆) as compared to the inscriptions on the ancient pottery (陶文). Today, the meaning of "mei" has started to relay on the meanings of "wonderful" (美好, meihao), "beautiful" (美丽, meili) and "delicious" (美味, meiwei).

Table 1: The morphology of "mei" (美) in the various inscriptions

No	Forms of morphology	Code	No	Forms of morphology	Code
Morphology of "mei" on Chinese oracle bone inscriptions (甲骨文)					
1		A686	2		A1269
Morphology of "mei" on Chinese bronze inscriptions (金文)					
3		Yinxu Wenzi Leibian (殷虚文字类编)	4		Yinxu Wenzi Leibian (殷虚文字类编)
Inscriptions on the ancient pottery (陶文)					
5		5.184	6		5.310
Inscriptions on the royal or official seal (玺文)					
7		5320	8		5319

As discussed by Xu (1998, pp.71a), "mei" is an associative compound, which is formed by combining two or more elements. It was formed by the elements of goat (羊, yang) which is deemed to be big (大, da), as thus considered beautiful "mei" (美). Wang (1970), further stressed that by looking at the writing of in the lesser seal character (小篆), "mei" (美) was only formed by the elements of goat and big (大, da). Duan & Xu (2007, pp.261a) and Zhu (1974, pp.620b) also agreed with this view by adding that goat that is big was supposed to be sweet and refreshing or luscious (甘美, ganmei). While Gui (1987, pp.302b), further elaborated the meaning of "mei" (美) as related to the meaning of "shan" (善, good, kind and virtuous). All these views were in parallel to the explanation of "mei" in *Shuowen Jiezi* (《说文解字》).

THE INTERPRETATIONS OF THE CHINESE CHARACTER "MEI" (美)'S CREACTION

The creation of the Chinese character "mei" (美) is a topic that has been explored by many researchers and scholars. After summarizing and categorizing the statements and opinions of the researchers, this article will briefly summarize and analyze them, and try to make relevant arguments or refutations.

According to Kong (1965, pp.66-67) the creation of "mei" (美) is an ideogram plus phonetic character, written as "媄" or "嫩". Chen (2002, pp.63-64) clarified the upper part of "mei" as a goat (羊, yang) that represented a female (女, nü) and the bottom part of of "mei" was a human being (人, ren) that represented a male (男, nan). Liu and Zhang (2010, pp.149) considered that character "mei" is the combination of "goat" (羊, yang) and "fire" (火, huo).

According to Xu (1995, pp.110-112), "mei" is a combined ideogram character that combined "goat" (羊, yang) and big (大, da). On the other hand, a Japanese scholar Tadachika Takada (1982, pp.2078) believed that "mei" carried out the meaning of sweetness (甘, gan). Another Japanese scholar Kasahara Nakaji (1988, pp.2-6) explained "mei" as a delicious fat goat according *Shuowen Jiezi* (《说文解字》).

According to Kang (1986, pp.131), "mei" (美) was a dancer with feathered embroidery. Yao (1996. Pp.224) suggested the upper part of of "mei" was a headwear and the bottom part was human being (人, ren). Furthermore, Yu (1963, pp.47-50) considered the upper part of "mei" appeared as the horns of goat or "goat" (羊, yang), and the bottom part was human being (人, ren). According to Wang, the upper part of "mei" was the feathered embroidery while the bottom part was the form of human being.

Xu (1993, pp.416) believed that upper part of "mei" was feathers of bird or goat's horns, the bottom part was human being (人, ren).

Table 2: The mural and bronze related with "mei" (美) was the feathered embroidery in upper part

No	Mural or bronze	Describtion or location
1		Liangzhu Jade "Divine Emblem" (良渚玉器"神徽")
2		Cangyuan mural point 1 Area 2 (沧源岩画第 1 点第 2区)

TEACHING PRACTICE OF CHINESE CHARACTER "MEI" (美)

   First of all, the instructor needs to explain the various inscriptions and meaning of "mei" (美) from Chinese oracle bone inscriptions (甲骨文) to the present character of "mei" (美). Nowadays, the instructor can invite students to try to write "mei" (美) with different inscriptions. Besides, the instructor can ask students about their views on "mei" (美) and different writing forms and meanings of "mei" (美). Students can express their views and opinions on "mei" (美) after the discussion. The instructor can ask the students to use the horns or feathers as the headwear, and let other students comment on whether the meaning of the Chinese character "mei" (美) comes from the feather embroidery on the body of the human or goat's horns on the head of human being. The instructor should use the theory of Six Methods of forming Chinese characters (六书) effectively to stimulate students' interest in learning Chinese characters and make every effort to improve teaching efficiency (Xu, 2020, pp.37). Finally, the instructor can summarize and conclude the students' views about character "mei" (美).

Table 3: The meaning of "mei" (美) in the various inscriptions

No	Types of inscriptions	Meaning of "mei" (美)
1	Chinese oracle bone inscriptions (甲骨文)	name of people captives or slaves names of places
2	Chinese bronze inscriptions (金文)	shapes of the horns of goats feather embroidery on the human
3	Inscriptions on the ancient pottery (陶文)	shapes of the horns of goats
4	Inscriptions on the royal or official seal (玺文)	feather embroidery on the human
5	Inscriptions of the bamboo slips （楚简文字）	relate to the meanings of wonderful, beautiful and delicious as today
6	Lesser seal character (小篆)	sweetness

Conclusion

   Based on researchers, there are several different meanings of "Mei" and Ruan (1964) considered it as an abstract concept. The discussions on the various inscriptions found that the meaning of "mei" in the inscriptions of oracle bone (甲骨文) had particularly referring to the names of people and places. When came to the inscriptions of bronze (金文), "mei" has started to carry the meaning of "wonderful" (美好, meihao). Then in the inscriptions of the bamboos (竹简), "mei" has further been elaborated not just as "wonderful" (美好, meihao), but also related to "beautiful" (美丽, meili) and "delicious" (美味, meiwei). This is also in paralled to *Shuowen Jiezi* (《说文解字》) which indicated "mei" (美) as "gan" (甘, sweetness). The evolution of the semantics of Chinese characters hence reflected not just pragmatically but also manifested in the process of transcriptions. The study of the Chinese character

in the light of the morphology will certainly open up more meanings of the characters in the history of their transcriptions. Thus, the efforts in deepening the knowledge on this area is worth putting in.

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