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The Study of The Chinese Character "Mei" (美) From the Perspectives of Chinese Character Creation

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Abstract

The Chinese character "mei"(美) carries out the meaning of beauty in Chinese. However, *Shuowen Jiezi* (《说文解字》) had denoted the meaning of "mei" as sweetness (甘) during the East Han dynasty, but there are still lots of arguments concerning the meaning of this Chinese character "mei" until now. Eventhough, the creation method of the Chinese character "mei" is a topic that had been explored by many researchers and scholars, they still fail to agree on one particular idea only for this character. Majority scholars divided character "mei" into upper and lower parts in their explanation or findings. The lower part of "mei" was recognized by majority scholars as "大" (da, big) or "人" (ren, human being). Yet, the controversial part was the upper part as there were various interpretations made by scholars on it namely goat, horns of goat, feather wearing, head ornaments, panache and etc. The unearthed artifacts and archaeological finds were presented as focuses of discussion. In giving contributions to the teaching and learning of Chinese linguistics courses such as etymology, ancient Chinese philology as well as related courses, the discussions in this paper is able to shed some lights.

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

Introduction

In Chinese, the word for beauty or beautiful is transcribed as měi, and the word měi (美) is composed of two images, one for large (大) and one for ram (羊) (Crockett, C. 2018, pp.66). While in the ancient dictionary during the East Han dynasty (202 BC–9 AD), *Shuowen Jiezi* (《说文解字》), which gave explanation of Chinese characters, has denoted the meaning of "mei" as sweetness (甘) (xu, 1977, pp.78). However, there are lots of arguments concerning the meaning of this Chinese character "mei". In this article, the semantics of "mei" will be discussed in the light of Chinese character creation. Transdisciplinary research is essential in providing good understanding of the intended Chinese characters such as "mei" and it is also essential for semantics analysis purpose.

THE CREATION METHODS OF CHINESE CHARACTER "MEI" (美)

There were at least 11 methods concerning the creation or forming of this Chinese character "mei". The focus of this article is on the argument and discussions on the creation or forming methods. After analyzing the creation or forming methods, this article will explain the reasons for supporting views and disagreed opinions.

A. Ideogram plus phonetic (形声说)

According to Kong (1965, pp.66-67), "mei" was formed from the sounds of "yang" (羊, goat) and "da" (大, big). It was agreeable that the big goat is considered beautiful (美, mei). According to Guo (1986), the phonetic transcriptions of ancient sound of "mei" (美), "yang" (羊, goat) and the "da" (大, big) were very much different from each other. Hence, this ideogram plus phonetic method in explaining the formation of the Chinese character "mei" (美) does not make sense and is not convincible.

B. Copulation explanation (交合说)

According to Chen (2002, pp.63-64), “羊” (yang, goat) symbolized female or woman. And “大” (da, big) was related to male or man. Hence, “羊” (yang, goat) and “大” (da, big) joined together and forming “mei” (美). However, this copulation explanation was lacking the support of linguistics study and archaeological provision.

C. Explanation based on goat (羊, yang) and fire (火, huo)

Liu and Zhang (2010, pp.149) discussed the formation of “mei” (美) based on the ancient aesthetics on beauty. They stated that the ancient “mei” was “美” (měi) which was formed from the words “羊” (yang, goat) and “火” (huo, fire). They further argued that the goat that was barbecued would present a very presentable taste (美味, meiwei), hence related to the concept of beauty “mei”. However, this kind of explanation is still suffered from the supports of archeological supports. Therefore, this explanation is definitely rejected.

D. Explanation based on goat (羊, yang) and big (大, da)

Xu (1995, pp.110-112) has explained the original meaning of “mei” (美) that consisted of two pictographic characters, namely “羊” (yang, goat) and “大” (da, big). There weren't any arguments concerning goat (羊, yang) in the formation of “mei”. The questionable element was on the big (大, da) element. Therefore, explanation based on big goat in forming “mei” is still not satisfying.

E. Explanation based on nice taste “gan” (甘)

According to Japanese scholar Tadachika Takada (1982, pp.2078), the taste of meat is delicious. Hence it leads to the meaning of “mei” (美) which carries the meaning of delicacy. *Erya* (《尔雅》), the first extant Chinese dictionary (c. 3rd century BC), with glossaries on classical texts, has given explanation on “mei”, but did not provide any relationships between “mei” (美, beauty) and “gan” (甘, tasty or sweetness). (Hao, 1983, pp.115). Thus, this point is still open to question.



F. Explanation based on both fat goat and good taste

A goat that is plump and strong as well as well-fed is generally in good taste (Kasahara Nakaji, 1988, pp.2-6). It was reflected in the classical Chinese literature, form the Chinese cultural way of thinking and mentality. However, the discussion has not taken into account the findings of “mei” on the oracle bone inscriptions (甲骨文) and bronze inscriptions (金文). This method of explanation did not cover all parts in “mei”, hence further contemplation and research need to be carried out to enhance the findings.

G. Explanation based on feather (yu, 羽) and man (ren, 人)

The original meaning of “mei” (美) has been related to the acts of feathers wearing and feathers decoration among the aborigines, shamans or witches (Wang, 2015, pp.69). It was supported by the unearthed artifacts, archaeological finds that clearly demonstrated the custom of feathers decoration and feathers wearing among the ancient people (refer table 1). Nevertheless, the oracle bone inscriptions (甲骨文) have provided the proofs that “mei” was similarly associated with the element of goat (羊, yang). Therefore, the explanation based on feathers and man did not comprehensively presenting the morphology and semantics of “mei”.

Table 1: The mural and bronze related with “mei” (美) was the feathers wearing and feathers decoration among the aborigines shamans or witches

No	Mural or bronze	Description or location
1		Feathered people with jade crown, the collection of National Palace Museum of Taiwan (台湾故宫博物院院藏玉冠羽人)
2		Cangyuan mural or rock painting, point 6 Area 3 (沧源岩画第 6 点第 3 区)

H. Explanation based on goat (yang, 羊) and man (ren, 人)

The ancient people started to imitate the actions of the goat in the dance. It was called hunting witchcraft or hunting sorcery (Xiao, 1980, pp.41-42). The ancient people believed that they could had a successfully hunting and get numerous preys after they imitated the goat acting. The Chinese character “mei” (美) was presenting this kind of goat acting. However, the forefathers who carried out the goat dancing were for the purpose of worship and not necessarily for beauty displaying. Henceforth the explanation based on goat and man is not really persuasive.

I. Explanation based on head ornaments

The head ornaments of the primitives initially were the imitation of horns on the heads of the animals. During the ending period of the prehistoric Shang dynasty (c. 16th-11th century BC), this kind of direct imitation has reduced. Therefore, beauty was seen as the wearing of crown on the head, or hairpin for bun as head ornaments have been offered sufficient proves in this aspect (Gao, 1988, pp.42). Even with the enumeration from the unearthed artifacts and archaeological finds, there isn't a satisfactory connection based on this explanation of “mei” (美). It provides more room for study in this aspect.

J. Explanation of dancing man with panache

In *The origin and development of Chinese character*, the explanation of character “mei” (美) was a dancing man with panache had been mentioned (Kang, 1986, pp.131). Panache with feathers decoration such as tails of the pheasant was considered beautiful. Since the dancing of witchcraft or sorcery was actually related to the formation of the Chinese character “舞” (wu, dance), it seemed unlikely that the ancient people of distinction would create “mei” that also in connection with witchcraft dancing.

K. Head ornaments of man with goat horn or wearing feathers

The appearance of human head with feathers for decoration, with the shape that looked like goat horn, had brought up the meaning of beauty (Li, 1994, pp.1323). Some may think that wearing horns were beautiful while others may think that wearing feathers decoration were pretty. Hence, this explanation is not consistent in explaining the formation and creation of “mei” (美) that represents the meaning of beauty.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF CHINESE LINGUISTICS COURSES

“Mei” (美) had been written in different ways in different periods, which proved that the Chinese characters are not immutable characters, they changed in different times and places. Moreover, we can

find out ancient pronunciations of “美” (měi) “羊” (yáng) and the “大” (dà). Finally, we can discover the aesthetics of ancient Chinese that considered a person who wearing feathers represented beauty.

Conclusion

“Mei” (美) is an abstract concept in nature. From the discussions above, the eleven explanations have been examined. The strengths of the explanations have been highlighted together with the weakness of those explanations. It was obvious that none of the explanations could be comprehensive and persuasive enough. The explanation of human head with goat horn decoration or feathers wearing was the most acceptable one, while the explanation based on phonogram, phonetic compound or picto-phonetic character, copulation, as well as goat and fire were the weakest explanations among all. Each of the explanations was with the suspicious parts and acceptable parts. More grounds of argument and evidence are needed for deeper clarification. Hence, future discussions and studies are called for the betterment of understanding on the creation and formation for “mei”.

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