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Volume 4

Shā–Z

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Hsiu Fang Yang

Wén 文 versus zì 字

Wén 文 and zì 字 are customarily presented as basic terms for the study of the Chinese writing system and usually interpreted as 'simple graphs' (wén) versus 'compound characters' (zì). For a now classic statement of this type see, e.g., Duàn Yùcái 段玉裁, 1735–1815, in his famous *Shuōwén Commentary* (*Shuōwén jiězì zhù*, 1988:15A 2b, cf.

Hú Pǔ'ān 1937:1). Since the meanings of these two words have changed with time, it is worth retracing their terminological history. The clarification of their different meanings is necessary in order to gain a better understanding of their semantic evolution as well as their importance for the theory of writing in China.

1. TERMINOLOGICAL HISTORY

In early Chinese texts, wén is associated with an array of meanings such as 'mark, line', 'ornaments', 'colorful, elegant, polished', 'cultivated', 'literature', 'civil' (cf. von Falkenhausen 1996), whereas zì is defined as 'to breast-feed, breed, nurture to cherish', and 'courtesy (or initiation) name'. One has to wait until the Qín-Hàn period for wén and zì to refer to '(written) characters'. The Eastern Hàn commentator Zhèng Xuán 鄭玄 (127–200) reflects this lexical shift in his commentary to the *Zhōulǐ* 周禮 (*Etiquette of the Zhōu*) when he says: "What in ancient times was called míng 名 'name' is nowadays called zì 'character/written word'." (*gǔ yuē míng jīn yuē zì* 古曰名今曰字; "Chūnguān, Wàishǐ 春官, 外史", *Zhōulǐ*: SSJZS 820c). According to the early Qīng polymath Gù Yánwǔ 顧炎武 (1613–1682, *Rì zhī lù* 21), the oldest attestation of wénzì 文字 in terms of 'characters' is recorded in the famous *Shǐjì* 史記 (*Records of the Scribe*) phrase *tóng shū wén zì* 同書文字 "unify the characters in the documents" (*Shǐjì* 6:245; also *shū tóng wén zì* 書同文字, 6:239), associated with Qín Shǐhuáng's 秦始皇 (259–210) programme to unify the competing Warring States kingdoms and impose his own system of characters throughout the empire.

2. 'GRAPHS' VERSUS 'WRITTEN WORDS'

For his → *Shuōwén jiězì* 說文解字, first submitted to the throne in 121 CE, Xǔ Shèn 許慎 (c. 58–147) has chosen a special title in which he contrasts the two terms wén and zì for the first time. Most specialists in Chinese writing interpret this distinction in terms of different graphic structure: simplex wén versus complex zì. However, philological evidence points to a very different distinction. In the main part of his work, Xǔ glosses the two characters as follows

- a. 文，錯畫也。象交文。
Wén, cuò huà yě. Xiàng jiāo wén.
 “Wén consists of intersecting lines. [Its graph] symbolizes an intersecting pattern.”
 (*Shuōwén* 9A 20a)
- b. 字，乳也。从子在宀下。子亦聲。
Zì, rǔ yě. Cóng zǐ zài mián xià. Zǐ yì shēng.
 “Zì is to breast-feed. [The graph] has zǐ ‘child’ under mián ‘roof’ as semantic constituents. Zǐ ‘child’ is at the same time the phonetic constituent.”
 (*Shuōwén* 14B 25a)

Evidently, Xǔ Shèn here glosses *wén* and *zì* according to their meaning in the classics, but in the postface to the *Shuōwén*, he uses them as “characters”: *wén* represent ‘patterns’ as such, whereas *zì* represent ‘written words’ related to names. There is no evidence that Xǔ Shèn invented a new terminology, “simple” versus “complex” characters. He simply distinguishes between two ways of looking at written signs observable at his time as *graphic patterns* and as *written words*. Among the 21 sentences in which *wén* and *zì* occur in the postface, two are essential to clarify their contrastive meaning.

1. 倉頡之初作書蓋依類象形故謂之文。其後形聲相益即謂之字。
Cāng Jié zhī chū zuò shū gài yī lèi xiàng xíng gù wèi zhī wén. Qí hòu xíngshēng xiāng yì jí wèi zhī zì.
 “When Cāng Jié first invented writing, it is presumably because he copied the forms according to their resemblance that they were called *wén* ‘patterns’. Then forms and pronunciations were added to each other, so they were called *zì* ‘written words’.”
2. 此十四篇五百四十部也九千三百五十三文解說凡十三萬三千四百四十一字。
Cǐ shí sì piān wǔ bǎi sì shí bù yě jiǔ qiān sān bǎi wǔ shí sān wén jiě shuō fán shí sān wàn sān qiān sì bǎi sì shí yī zì.
 “These 14 chapters comprise 540 radicals, 9,353 graphs and a total of 133,441 written words in the explanations.”

The first sentence is usually taken to describe the invention of simple characters by Cāng Jié and then that of complex characters by the combination of forms and sounds, as in *xíngshēngzì* 形聲字 (‘semanto-phonograms’). But on the face of it, Xǔ Shèn says nothing of the kind. In fact, he is describing the genealogy of writing, and shows how Cāng Jié started by depicting patterns of things—a sometimes complex undertaking—before writing down words. Indeed, the notation of words came later, once pronunciations were added to shapes. In other words, the shift from *wén* to *zì* represents the crucial shift from depicting reality to writing down the words describing this reality. It is certainly no exaggeration to say that Xǔ Shèn expounds his philosophy of the origins of writing words in this very important sentence.

The second sentence also shows that *wén* and *zì* cannot be understood as “simple characters” versus “compound characters”. Simply because among the 9,353 *wén* gathered as entries by Xǔ Shèn in the *Shuōwén*, there are many compound characters, and among the 133,441 *zì* used in the explanations, there are many non-compound characters. Here again, Xǔ Shèn focusses on the physical shape of graphs with *wén*, and on their use as words, with *zì*.

Thus, both *wén* and *zì* refer to characters in the *Shuōwén*, but from two different perspectives: the figurative and non-linguistic aspect with *wén*, and the linguistic one with *zì*. Only this reading of *wén* as ‘graphs/patterns’ and of *zì* as ‘written words’ would seem to be in accordance with the development of the original meaning of these two terms.

3. SIMPLEX VERSUS COMPLEX CHARACTERS

The graphic analysis of *wén* and *zì* shows that *zì* 字 itself is a compound character including two constituents *zǐ* 子 and *mián* 宀, whereas *wén* 文 is a simple character. Xǔ Shèn was certainly aware of the principles of graphic composition at the basis of character creation, since he distinguished semantic and phonetic constituents of graphs in his work.

The first author to focus on the distinction between *wén* and *zì* in terms of non-compound

versus compound characters is apparently Xú Kǎi 徐鍇 (920–974), 800 years after Xǔ Shèn's death, when he writes in his *Shuōwén jiězì xī zhuàn* 說文解字繫傳 (*Attached Commentarial Traditions to the Shuōwén jiězì*) (1.2b):

3. 六文之中，象形者，蒼頡本所起，觀察天地萬物之形，謂之文。故文少。後相配合，孳益為字，則形聲、會意者是也。故形聲最多。

Liù wén zhī zhōng, xiàng xíng zhě, Cāng Jié běn suǒ qǐ, guān chá tiān dì wàn wù zhī xíng, wèi zhī wén. Gù wén shǎo. Hòu xiāng pèi hé, zī yì wéi zì, zé xíng shēng, huìyì zhě shì yě. Gù xíng shēng zuì duō.

“Among the six types of graphs, the imitation of shape (*xiàng xíng*) is what Cāng Jié originally based himself upon. He observed and investigated the shapes of the Myriad Things in the sky and on the earth, and they were called *wén* [‘graphs/marks/patterns’]. Consequently, *wén* are not numerous. Later on, they were combined together and by a generative process, they produced the *zì*. Therefore *xíng shēng* and *huì yì* are of this kind. Consequently, *xíng shēng* are the most numerous.”

Note that in this first attempt to link *wén* and *zì* with the → *liùshū* 六書 ‘six ways of writing down (words)’, here called *liùwén* 六文, Xú Kǎi has considerably modified Xǔ Shèn’s original text—having nothing to say about other *liùshū* principles. He has limited the parallel between *wén* and *zì* to the three categories *xiàng xíng* 象形 ‘imitating shape’, *xíng shēng* 形聲 ‘semantic-phonetic [compounds]’ and *huì yì* 會意 ‘associating ideas’.

Apparently, the first author to define *wén* as ‘non-compound characters’, (*dú tǐ* 獨體) and *zì* as ‘compound characters’ (*hé tǐ* 合體) is Zhèng Qiáo 鄭樵 (1104–1162). In the preface of his *Liùshū lüè* 六書略 [Précis of the Six ways of writing down (words)], included in his comprehensive encyclopedia *Tōngzhì* 通志 (*Comprehensive Treatises*) of 1149 he writes:

4. 小學之義第一當識子母之相生，第二當識文字之有間。象形指事文也。會意諧聲轉注字也，假借文字俱也。

xiǎo xué zhī dì yī dāng shí zǐ mǔ zhī xiāng shēng, dì èr dāng shí wén zì zhī yǒu jiān. Xiàng xíng zhǐ shì wén yě. Huì yì xíngshēng zhuǎnzhù zì yě, jiǎjiè wénzì jù yě.

“The point of *xiǎoxué* [i.e., the discipline of ‘ars minor’] is first to recognize the interdependent genesis of ‘mother’ and ‘child’; and then to recognize the difference between *wén* and *zì*. *Xiàngxíng* and *zhǐshì* are *wén*; *huìyì*, *xiéshēng* and *zhuǎnzhù* are *zì*; *jiǎjiè* are both *wén* and *zì*.”

Zhèng Qiáo provides his corresponding definition of *wén* and *zì* in his preface to another treatise, the “*Qiyīn lüè* 七音略” [Précis of the seven sounds]:

5. 獨體為文，合體為字。漢儒知以說文解字，而不知文有子、母，則失制字之旨。生字為母，從母為子。子、母不分所以失制字之旨。

Dú tǐ wéi wén, hé tǐ wéi zì. Hàn Rú zhī yǐ Shuōwén jiězì, ér bù zhī wén yǒu zǐ, mǔ, zé shī zhì zì zhī zhǐ. Shēng zì wéi mǔ, cóng mǔ wéi zǐ. Zǐ, mǔ bù fēn suǒyǐ shī zì zhī zhǐ.

“Simplex [characters] constitute *wén* and complex [characters] constitute *zì*. The Hàn scholars knew that from the *Shuōwén jiězì*, but did not understand that among non-compound characters there were ‘children’ [i.e., phonetic constituents] and ‘mothers’ [i.e., semantic constituents]. Consequently they missed the significance of character creation. What engenders characters counts as the ‘mother’ [i.e., semantic constituents], what accompanies the ‘mother’ counts as the ‘child’ [i.e., phonetic constituents]. When ‘mother’ and ‘child’ are not distinguished, one misses the significance of character creation.”

When Zhèng Qiáo promoted the idea that Chinese writing combines small units (constituents) into characters (written words) with the new formula *dú tǐ wéi wén, hé tǐ wéi zì* 獨體為文，合體為字, he was quite possibly influenced by his knowledge of Indian writing that combines letters into words (Bottéro 2004). He attributed this analysis to the *Shuōwén jiězì* in which the distinction between *wén* and *zì* was made for

the first time, and in which graphs were systematically analyzed into constituents. It is amusing to note that this new interpretation replaced Xǔ Shèn's original analysis of *wén* and *zì* almost definitively. Thus, scholarly traditions since the Sòng period have almost unanimously tended to follow Zhèng Qiáo's lead and interpreted the *Shuōwén* postface in the light of his theory.

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Francoise Bottéro

Western Views of the Chinese Language

Western approaches to the Chinese language have gone through several phases. Some first-hand information about the Chinese language and writing system reached Europe in the 13th century. European views of Chinese were largely shaped by 16th and 17th century missionary accounts, some of which were translated into several European languages and distributed in different countries (Lach 1965:743; Mungello 1989:48, 75, Klöter 2011:27). In the 17th century, the Chinese language became a topic in European intellectual debates, e.g., as within the framework of the search for the universal language (Mungello 1989:16; Harbsmeier 1998:11, Eco 1993). Progressively, a certain relativization of the Latin grammatical model led to a greater attention to the specific features of the Chinese language (Peyraube 2001:345–346). Despite this, knowledge about Chinese remained relatively limited in Europe for centuries, and Western perceptions and stereotypes that had been derived from the first accounts by missionaries and travelers, such as the "ideographic myth" or the "universality myth" (DeFrancis 1984), proved to be remarkably persistent.

1. EARLY DESCRIPTION OF CHINESE

Firsthand information on the Chinese language can be found in the writings of European