

A Study on the Representation of Ancient Marriage System in Chinese Characters from a Diachronic Perspective

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Abstract. Chinese characters have endured through the ages, containing rich cultural connotations. This paper takes the diachronic changes in the marriage system as its basis and reveals how the ancient marriage system is reflected in Chinese characters through in-depth analysis of the origin and evolution of Chinese characters, providing a new perspective for understanding ancient Chinese society and culture.

Keywords: Chinese characters, marriage system, marriage customs

1. Introduction

Chinese characters have a long history and have evolved over thousands of years, becoming one of the most widely used writing systems in the world. From the oracle bone inscriptions of the Shang Dynasty to the regular script commonly used today, the history of Chinese characters has never ceased, but many characters have undergone changes in form and meaning. The concept of "marriage" has appeared in the Book of Songs, where "昏姻之故，言就尔居" ("Because of the marriage, speak and settle in your home") in the "Xiao Ya" section refers to marriage. Chinese marriage culture has undergone a long and complex development process from ancient times to the present, with each era showing its unique style and profound cultural connotations.

The renowned American anthropologist Morgan mentioned in his anthropological work "Ancient Society" that human society has experienced sequential forms of marriage and family structure: kinship system, group marriage, pairing marriage, patriarchal system (polygyny), and monogamous system [1]. Many Chinese characters reflect the changes in our country's marriage system roughly following the sequence mentioned by Morgan. These marriage forms and customs have a long history in ancient Chinese society, reflecting the changes in social structure, cultural traditions, and moral concepts.

2. Representation of the Evolution of Marriage System in Chinese Characters



2.1. Group Marriage System and Surname Characters


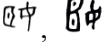
From the ancient bloodline clan commune to the early matrilineal system, there were two types of marriage: intra-clan group marriage (intra-clan marriage or blood marriage) and inter-clan group marriage (inter-clan marriage).

Intra-clan marriage, also known as blood group marriage, refers to the prohibition of intermarriage between father and son in the family, allowing only men and women of the same generation (siblings) to marry. *Du Yi Zhi* by Li Rong [2] from the late Tang Dynasty records that Fu Xi and Nuwa were the earliest couple, and they created humans by combining their bloodlines, which is an example of intra-clan marriage. With the development of human society, group marriages gradually transitioned from intra-clan to inter-clan. Inter-clan marriage not only prohibited marriage between siblings, but also gradually prohibited intermarriage among all members within the same clan. This is the origin of the ancient custom of "not marrying those with the same surname."

Mr. Wang Li once said, "Surname is a tribal name, and clan is a branch of surname. Many ancient surnames such as Jiang, Ji, Yao, Ying, Si, etc., all have the female radical, indicating that our ancestors once experienced a matriarchal society." [3] Mythological figures we are familiar with, such as emperors, Fu Xi, and Shen Nong, all have a great mother, but there is no mention of their father, which is a manifestation of the matrilineal clan group marriage system. From two typical surname

characters, we can also understand this.

The oracle bone script for "姜" is , with a sheep horn above and a woman below. In ancient times, sheep were just domesticated by humans and were the most valuable property in the tribe. The connection between women and sheep indicates the status of women in the matrilineal clan society at that time. The Jin script for "姜" in the Zhou Dynasty is , with "母" replacing "女," indicating that the female leader is the mother, a respected and venerable grandmother. The origin of the Jiang surname is related to sheep and directly comes from the female leader with a sheep head decoration. Li Xueqin, Sun Zhongyun, and other scholars believe that "羌" and "姜" are both Qiang people, distinguished by gender, with "羌" meaning "male" and "姜" meaning "female." Later, "羌" was used as the ethnic name "Qiang," and "姜" was used as the surname "Jiang." *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* mentions, "Shen Nong lived by the Jiang River and took it as a surname," which means that people at that time recorded the image of the female leader with the symbol "姜" and used "姜" as a symbol of the clan. The river on which they depended for their livelihood might have been named "Jiang River" because of this.


The oracle bone script for "姬" is , shaped like a combination of a woman and a comb-shaped symbol. The Jin script is , with scholars believing that the one or two dots on the left side protrude the features of female breasts, depicting a woman with a full chest. Regardless of which pattern represents the Ji surname, it is inseparable from women, indicating that the tribe still emphasized using female images to represent the surname of the tribe. *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* (Explaining Simple and Compound Characters) explains it as "The emperor lives by the Ji River and takes it as a surname." Its surname is similar to Jiang. The commentary in *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* says, "Taking birth as a surname, such as Shen Nong's mother living by the Jiang River, taking it as a surname, the emperor's mother living by the Ji River, taking it as a surname, and Shun's mother living by the Yao River, taking it as a surname." From this, we can see that in the ancient matrilineal clan society, blood relationships were maintained by the mother.


Therefore, the phenomenon of "only knowing the mother, not knowing the father" was very common at that time. Women were seen as the core force of reproduction and nurturing new life, and it was believed that the identity and rights of children were passed down through the mother, and the family and social structure revolved around women.

2.2. Dual Marriage and the Manifestation in Chinese Characters

Dual marriage refers to a marriage method where both parties voluntarily and without restrictions, and in some sense, require the same couple to live together. It is a special type of marriage that results from numerous partners transitioning into a single partner relationship.

With the development of productivity, people gradually began to settle down. Due to the bravery and physical advantages of men in productive labor, men's status gradually surpassed that of women. During this period, the role of individuals in productive labor increased, and individual consciousness gradually strengthened. People began to seek "lifetime companions". In ancient literature, the records of "family" and "house" often refer to the husband and wife in a family. In *Zuo Commentary: The Eighteenth Year of Duke Huan*, it says, "Women have a family, men have a house." In this sentence, "having a family" represents marriage, and "having a house" represents taking a wife. From this, we can understand some aspects of the dual system.

The oracle bone script for the character "house" (室) is , depicting the shape of the top of a house, with "至" underneath, which not only represents the phonetic component but also signifies stopping or ceasing. In *Shuo Wen Jie Zi*, it is noted: "室, 实也。至, 所止也。" Here, "室" originally means a room or a dwelling place. In *Book of Rites* (Liji), section *Qu Li I* (Summary of the Rules of Propriety, Part 1), it states: "三十曰壮, 有室," where "室" refers to a wife. Zheng Xuan comments: "有室, 有妻也, 妻称室," meaning "having a room" signifies having a wife, and a wife is referred to as "室" (room). This highlights that when a man started to have a wife living with him under the same roof, people gradually moved away from living in groups and began to lead relatively stable, settled lives. Consequently, the concept of "家" (home) gradually emerged.

The oracle bone script for the character "family" (家) is , which consists of "宀" (mián) on top, indicating a connection with the concept of a house, and "豕" (shǐ) below, which represents a pig. *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* explains: "家, 居也。" Here, "豕" (shǐ) refers to a male pig, indicating the development of animal husbandry at that time. Additionally, in ancient times, men were often analogized with male pigs. If there is a male pig under "宀", it signifies a family (家); if there is a female under "宀", it signifies peace (安). The term "安家" (ān jiā, to settle a family) is still commonly used in modern life. The words "安" (ān) and "家" (jiā), one from the female side and the other from the male side, indicate that the concept of family originated from the transition from matriarchy to patriarchy, moving away from the stage of "knowing the mother but not the father" [4], which also indicates the relatively fixed nature of marriage between men and women at that time.

However, during this period, the spouses were not completely fixed. This marriage system still had its irrationalities, so "dual marriage" was soon replaced by the more reasonable "monogamous marriage".

2.3. Concubinage Marriage and the Manifestation in Chinese Characters

In modern weddings, there are often "bridesmaids" accompanying the bride, and some families even specifically request unmarried women to be bridesmaids. This evolution of customs can be traced back to the "concubinage marriage" under the ancient Chinese patriarchal marriage system.

Ancient "concubinage marriage" refers to the practice of a sister marrying together with her elder sister or a niece marrying together with her aunt. This system was mainly limited to the aristocratic class such as the nobles and feudal lords. In *Book of Poetry·Spring Water*, it says, "变彼诸姬，聊与之谋。" (The ladies here are the companions for mutual counsel.) The term "诸姬" (zhū jī) refers to the daughters of the Ji clan. *Shiming·Shiqinshu* explains: "媵，承也，承事嫡也。" (Concubinage: to serve the main wife.) The custom of concubinage marriage already existed during the Yin and Shang dynasties, and there is even the term "媵臣" (yòng chén), which refers to concubines who were brought along.

The women married to the same husband were called "姒" (sì), usually referring to older women, while "娣" (dì) referred to younger women who were also married to the same husband. According to the record in *Erya*, the words "姒" and "娣" were corresponding terms used to distinguish the status of women of different generations married to the same husband. *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* says: "娣，younger sister." In the poem *Han Yi* from *Book of Poetry*, it says, "韩侯取妻，汾王之甥，蹇父之子.....诸娣从之，祁祁如云。" (Han Marquis took a wife, the nephew of the King of Fen, the son of Jue... the sisters followed him, quietly and harmoniously.) "The younger sisters of the wife," also known as "娣," indicate that the custom of sisters marrying the same husband existed in ancient times. The characters "姒" and "娣" also indicate that men could marry multiple women at that time.

2.4. Capture Marriage and Its Reflection in Chinese Characters

Capture marriage, also known as "bride kidnapping," refers to the practice where a man abducts a woman from another tribe to marry her. *Yijing (Book of Changes)*, "Tun" hexagram's line statement reads: "屯如遭如，乘马班如，匪寇婚媾.....乘马班如，泣血涟如，" which depicts the scene of a woman being kidnapped. This practice was common among nomadic tribes where men dominated, and it still exists among some ethnic minorities.

The Chinese character for marriage, "婚," provides insights into this custom. In *Shuo Wen Jie Zi*, "婚" is explained as: "婚，妇家也。礼，娶妇以昏时。妇人阴也，故曰婚。从女，昏声。" This explanation reveals that in ancient times, marriages took place in the evening, thus the character "昏" (dusk) also signifies the timing of marriage ceremonies. This practice of evening weddings is actually a relic of the ancient custom of bride kidnapping. Zhang Shunhui's *Notes on Shuo Wen Jie Zi* elaborates: "古娶妇必以昏时者，当缘上世有劫掠妇女之风，必乘夜昏人定时取之，以避寇犯也，" explaining that the evening wedding tradition arose because women were often abducted at night to avoid raids.

Nowadays, "婚" is often used with "姻" to form "婚姻" (marriage). *Baihu Tongyi* states: "昏者行礼，故谓之婚也；妇人因夫而成，故曰姻。" Zheng Xuan's annotation in the *Book of Rites (Liji)* further clarifies: "婿曰婚，妻曰姻，" meaning the groom's marriage is called "婚" and the bride's marriage is called "姻." The characters "婚" and "姻" together emphasize the union and the binding of the couple's fate [4]. "婚姻" signifies the formal and legal establishment of a marital relationship.

The character "娶" (to marry, for a man) originally derived from "取" (to take or capture). The oracle bone script for "取" resembles an ear, symbolizing capturing the ear of an enemy as proof of victory. *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* explains: "取，捕取也。从又从耳。《周礼》：‘获者取左耳。’" In ancient times, warriors would cut off the left ear of their enemies as a trophy, hence "取" implies forceful taking or seizing. In *Zuozhuan*, it reads: "四月，郑祭足帅师取温之麦。秋，又取成周之禾，" where "取" means to plunder. In "Records of the Grand Historian" (Shiji), it states: "吴起取齐女为妻，而鲁疑之，吴起于是欲就名，遂杀其妻，以明不与齐也，" where "取" means to marry. This shows that "娶" (to marry) and "取" (to take) share a common origin, reflecting the forceful aspect of ancient marriages.

In traditional Chinese weddings, the bride covers her head with a red veil, which some scholars believe originated from the practice of bride kidnapping. The veil prevented the bride from seeing and remembering the way to escape. This custom is still observed in modern Chinese weddings, reflecting the lingering influence of ancient capture marriage practices.

2.5. Marriage by Purchase and Its Reflection in Chinese Characters

Marriage by purchase, also recorded during the Western Zhou period, includes practices like arranged marriage, dowry exchange, and bride price [5]. Chen Guyuan in *Chinese Marriage History* describes it as: "买卖婚者，视女子如货品，而以其他财物换取妻妾之谓也，" [6] indicating that women were treated as commodities exchanged for other goods.

Shuo Wen Jie Zi explains "嫁" (to marry, for a woman) as: "嫁，女适人也。" Li Fan in *A Brief History of Chinese Characters* [7] mentions that "嫁" derives from "贾" (to trade) and "沽" (to sell), signifying that marriage involved an exchange. The character "嫁" reflects the practice where a woman's marriage is seen as a transaction. In the Zhou Dynasty, the "six rites" included "纳征" (presenting gifts), establishing the foundation for marriage by purchase. Although modern customs may still involve bride price, the perception has shifted towards providing financial support for the new family rather than treating women as commodities.

2.6 Arranged Marriage and Its Reflection in Chinese Characters

Engels stated: "In all of ancient times, the establishment of marriage was arranged by the parents, and the individuals involved obediently complied. The little bit of love that existed between husband and wife in ancient times was not a matter of personal preference, but rather an objective duty, not the foundation of the marriage, but an addition to it." [8] In ancient China, marriage was often arranged by parents, with a focus on social status and family alliance.

Shuo Wen Jie Zi defines "媒" (matchmaker) as: "媒，谋也。谋合二姓，" and "妁" (female matchmaker) as: "酌也，斟酌二姓也。" *Book of Songs (Shijing)* mentions matchmakers: "匪我愆期，子无良媒。" This sentence means that it was not the woman who deliberately delayed the wedding date with the man, but rather that the man's family had not found a good matchmaker to propose marriage. This sentence from *Meng* reflects that as early as the Zhou Dynasty, matchmakers were already an indispensable part of marriage relations. Without the participation of a good matchmaker, marriage between a man and a woman could not proceed. The 'New Songs from the Jade Terrace' also contains records about matchmakers: 'The county magistrate sent a matchmaker.' This shows the important role of matchmakers in ancient marriages; the emergence of this profession met the needs of the times. From group marriages and exogamy in primitive societies to monogamy in civilized societies, as human marriage systems continuously evolved, and as feudal rites and teachings continuously developed, there was inevitably a need for professions like matchmakers to serve as bridges between men and women in marriage.

To this day, 'matchmakers' still exist, playing a role in connecting men and women, demonstrating the profound influence of ancient marriage customs on modern marriage."

3. Conclusion

Chinese characters, as an ideographic system, embody a rich historical and cultural essence in their structure and evolution. The importance of teaching Chinese characters lies not only in enabling students to acquire a fundamental skill but also in the profound cultural connotations inherent in the characters themselves. Therefore, in integrated courses, combining the teaching of Chinese characters with the evolution of marriage systems, and categorizing the characters accordingly, can not only enrich the teaching content and enhance students' interest in learning Chinese characters but also strengthen family and marriage concepts through character education, thereby promoting social harmony and stability.

As society continues to progress and the level of scientific and cultural knowledge improves, people's understanding of marriage also evolves. The concepts of marital freedom and gender equality are increasingly esteemed and valued. Through the analysis of Chinese character culture, we can glimpse the ancient marriage forms that once prevailed on the historical stage and have since disappeared with time. These characters not only display the aspects of marriage and family in ancient societies but also help us understand the truth and essence of the evolution of marriage systems.

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