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The Evolution of Phonetic Notation in Ancient China

until the Thirty-six Alphabets

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Respected Venerable Shengmiao and my teacher, good morning. My name is Qixuan Zhou and I would like to share with you the topic on "The evolution of phonetic notation in ancient China until the Thirty-six Alphabets".

There are many ways of phonetic notation in ancient China, the most famous of which is Fanqie (反切). But before Fanqie, in fact, since the formation of phonogram¹, all kinds of phonetic notation came out one after another. As we all know, pictograph² were the earliest characters. In the process of evolution, it is difficult for people to distinguish the content of characters from their glyphs. So, they add a phonetic notation to make it easier to be recognized. For example, the character huang 凰 was originally like a phoenix, but later it was easy to make mistakes with other birds, so it was added a character fan 凡 as a phonetic.³ Another example like the character ju 居 used to depict a person's kneeling posture. Later, it gradually evolved into the shape of a corpse character, which was not easy to identify. The character gu 古 with phonetic notation were added at the bottom to indicate the pronunciation of the time.⁴

The second is "Phonetic notation with analogy" (譬況註音法). This is a descriptive way to express pronunciation. It is a very abstract and general way. It may be a good reminder for the phonetist, but for others, if they do not know the word at all, they can not read it even after reading the description. For example, in *The Gongyang commentary of Spring and Autumn Annals*, He Xiu commented that if the character fa 伐 means aggress, Qi people said, you should read it in a long way; if the character fa 伐 means be aggressed, Qi people said, you should read it in a short way.⁵ For those of us who do not know what the so-called Qi people really is, we can not know its specific pronunciation no matter in long or short way, which shows that its limitations are quite great.

The third one is "Phonetic Notation of Similar Pronunciation" (讀若註音法). This kind of phonetic notation is to find a word with similar pronunciation to describe the pronunciation. It can be seen that this way is more specific than the previous phonetic notation. As long as you can read the following words, you can roughly understand how to read the previous words. For example, in *Shuowen Jiezi*, Xu Shen used a lot of phonetic notation of Similar Pronunciation, such as the character dang 漾, this word describes the feeling of water fluctuation, so its pronunciation was similar to the character dang 蕩;⁶ the character wei 媿 which means obedience, and its

¹ Qiu Xigui 裘錫圭, *wenzixue gaiyao* 文字學概要 [Chinese Writing], (California, Birdtrack Press), p473.

² Qiu Xigui 裘錫圭, *wenzixue gaiyao* 文字學概要 [Chinese Writing], (California, Birdtrack Press), p473.

³ Zhu Jianing 竺家寧, *shengyunxue* 聲韻學 [Chinese Phonology], (Taipei, Wu-Nan Book Inc), p207.

⁴ Zhu Jianing 竺家寧, *shengyunxue* 聲韻學 [Chinese Phonology], (Taipei, Wu-Nan Book Inc), p207.

⁵ He Xiu 何休, *chunqiu gongyangzhuan zhushu* 春秋公羊傳註疏 [The annotation of *The Gongyang commentary of Spring and Autumn Annals*], (Shanghai, Shanghai Classics Publishing House), p326.

⁶ Duan Yucai 段玉裁, *shuowen jiezizhu* 說文解字注 [The annotation of *shuowen jiezi*], (Beijing, Zhonghua Book Company), p2183.

pronunciation was similar to the character mei 媚 at that time.⁷ This kind of phonetic notation is simple and easy to understand. But for the above example, if we do not recognize the character Dang 蕩 or the character mei 媚, then this kind of phonetic notation still impractical, which shows that it also has great limitations.

If several previous phonetic notation methods all recognize pronunciation from the whole syllable(syllable), then from the invention of Fanqie, we already know how to divide the syllable into smaller units, which can be said to be a great progress.⁸

Let's briefly introduce the Fanqie—reverse or cut. This is a way to mark the pronunciation of another Chinese character with two Chinese characters. The simple formula is as follows:

X— AB reverse (反)

Or X— AB cut (切)

Among them, X stands for the character to be phoneticized, that is, the character to be cut, A & B are the characters to phoneticize, A is the Fanqie upper character (反切上字), its initial consonant is the same as the cut character X, B is the Fanqie lower character (反切下字), its final consonant and tone are the same as the cut character X.⁹

Compared with the analysis of finals and the classification of tones, the induction, classification and naming of initials are much later.¹⁰ In fact, since people learned to use Fanqie to mark pronunciation, they sometimes consciously summed up words with the same initials, which was called "Shuangsheng" (雙聲).¹¹ In the Six Dynasties period, it even became a social trend. Gradually, some people think that, in this case, it will be better to take a word to represent a group of disyllabic words. It will be more convenient. Thanks to the Buddhist scriptures translated in the Tang Dynasty, we got inspiration from Sanskrit alphabets, and gradually summed up the "Thirty Alphabets" (三十字母) and the later the "Thirty-six Alphabets" (三十六字母).¹² These alphabets were different with the alphabets in English, they were also Chinese words, which means the stands for the initials.

"Thirty Alphabets" is also known as "Shou Wen Thirty Alphabets" (守溫三十字母)¹³, which is the beginning of the Chinese phonetic alphabet. However, there is no final conclusion on who initiated this. Because since the Song Dynasty, scholars only know the "Thirty-six Alphabets", and the "Thirty Alphabets" had long been lost. It was until the Ming Dynasty that Lv Jieru mentioned in his *Tongwenduo* that "Sheli of the Tang Dynasty created 'Thirty Alphabets'. Later, Wen shouzu added six alphabets: *Niang, Chuang, Bang, Pang, Wei, Feng* (娘, 床, 幫, 滂, 微, 奉) and changed them into 'Thirty-six Alphabets'.¹⁴ So, is the Thirty-six Alphabets written by Shou Wen? Professor Luo Changpei believes that the Thirty Alphabets are created by Shou Wen, while the Thirty-six Alphabets should be created in Song Dynasty under the pretext of Shou Wen.¹⁵ However, Professor

⁷ Duan Yucai 段玉裁, *shuowen jiezhizhu* 說文解字注 [The annotation of *shuowen jiezi*], (Beijing, Zhonghua Book Company), p2479.

⁸ Lin Tao 林燾 Geng Zhensheng 耿振聲, *shengyunxue* 聲韻學 [Chinese Phonology], (Taipei, San Min Book), p56.

⁹ Lin Tao 林燾 Geng Zhensheng 耿振聲, *shengyunxue* 聲韻學 [Chinese Phonology], (Taipei, San Min Book), p51.

¹⁰ Lin Tao 林燾 Geng Zhensheng 耿振聲, *shengyunxue* 聲韻學 [Chinese Phonology], (Taipei, San Min Book), p58.

¹¹ Zhu Jianing 竺家寧, *shengyunxue* 聲韻學 [Chinese Phonology], (Taipei, Wu-Nan Book Inc), p237.

¹² Chen Xinxiong 陳新雄, *shengyunxue* 聲韻學 [Chinese Phonology], (Taipei, The Liberal Arts Press), p52.

¹³ Zhu Jianing 竺家寧, *shengyunxue* 聲韻學 [Chinese Phonology], (Taipei, Wu-Nan Book Inc), p239.

¹⁴ Chen Xinxiong 陳新雄, *shengyunxue* 聲韻學 [Chinese Phonology], (Taipei, The Liberal Arts Press), p52.

¹⁵ Lin Yin 林尹, *zhongguo shengyunxue tonglun* 中國聲韻學通論 [The General Treatise of Chinese Phonology], (Taipei, Li Ming Cultural Enterprise Co, Ltd), p57.

Lin Jingyi believes that it is not necessarily created by Shou Wen, for the meaning of "statement without writing", because it is not equals to that of writing. Moreover, the Thirty Alphabets recorded in the remnant volume are exactly different from the Thirty-six Alphabets well known today, which is the six alphabets mentioned by Lv Jieru in *Tongwenduo*. His statement may not be untrustworthy.¹⁶ Today, we choose Professor Lin's view that the Thirty Alphabets here should be created by the Sheli of the Tang Dynasty, while the Thirty-six Alphabets here were modified by Shou Wen according to the Thirty Alphabets. And then let us see which 30 alphabets in the Thirty Alphabets. As we can see, they had been divided into 5 parts, which are Labial sound, Tongue sound, Velar sound, Dental sound and Laryngeal sound.

The last, by comparing the Thirty Alphabets with the Thirty-six Alphabets, we can see that, firstly, Thirty Alphabets lack of Labiodental Sound (輕脣音): *Fei, Fu, Feng, Wei* (非, 敷, 奉, 微); At that time, it was not clear between Labiodental Sound and Bilabial Sound (重脣音) in pronunciation, *Fang* 芳 in the Thirty Alphabets actually represented *Pang* 滂 in the Thirty-six Alphabets.

Secondly, there is no *Niang* 娘 in the Thirty Alphabets. Some scholars think that *niang* 娘 and *ni* 泥 belong to the same root. For example, Professor Dong Tonghe thinks that this is only a formal difference,¹⁷ but in fact, *Niang* 娘 and *Ni* 泥 cannot be separated into one through the Connecting and Linking (系聯). Therefore, Professor Zhu Jianing thinks that there is a phonetic differences between them. *Ni* 泥 represents the tip of the tongue nasal sound, while *Niang* 娘 is the surface of the tongue nasal sound.¹⁸ However, there is no difference in the phonology, both are n-.

Thirdly, there is *Chan* 禪 in the Thirty Alphabets, but not *Chuang* 床. Among the Thirty Alphabets, it is actually the combination of *Chan* 禪 and *Chuang* 床. The difference between the two Alphabets is that one is voiced affricate, the other is voiced fricative.

These all for my presentation today. Thanks for listening.

¹⁶ Lin Yin 林尹, *zhongguo shengyunxue tonglun* 中國聲韻學通論 [The General Treatise of Chinese Phonology], (Taipei, Li Ming Cultural Enterprise Co, Ltd), p57.

¹⁷ Dong Tonghe 董同龢, *hanyu yinyunxue* 漢語音韻學 [Chinese Phonology], (Taipei, The Liberal Arts Press), p194.

¹⁸ Zhu Jianing 竺家寧, *shengyunxue* 聲韻學 [Chinese Phonology], (Taipei, Wu-Nan Book Inc), p241.

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