



Trinity Saint David

Student Name: Estienne Ren	
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The evolution of numbers in Chinese writing

The topic of my presentation today is “the evolution of numbers in Chinese writing”. And my presentation is composed of four parts: an introduction in which I will give you a quick background of Chinese numbers, and in the second part I will explain the development of Chinese numbers by discussing into several different categories, and finally a conclusion.

I- Introduction

Today, the numerals system used in Chinese consists of three type of writing which is: traditional Chinese, simplified Chinese and Arabic numerals. These three types of writing don't affect any difference in reading, but in writing each of them is very different. For today, we will only focus on the evolution of simplified Chinese numbers.

Chinese numbers are part of *zhishi* (指事) and *jiajie* (假借). Firstly, what is *zhishi*? *Zhishi* is one of the six categories of Chinese characters; abstract symbols are used, and it means using symbols to express the meaning of things, a situation. However, here the word “thing” in English doesn't refer to something concrete to an object, but refer in an approximate way to an idea, subject, event, action, etc. And secondly, what is *jiajie*? *Jiajie* is the method of using existing form of Chinese character to represent homophoned words with different meanings in a language.

II- Chinese numbers evolution from oracle bone inscription to regular style

I will explain Chinese numbers evolution from oracle bone inscription (甲骨文) to regular style (楷書) by separating the numbers into three several sections.

1. *Zhishi* numbers

The first category of numbers is the characters “one” to “three”, they are considered as cumulative strokes representing numbers. So, from the earliest oracle bone inscription to regular style, the character number “one” (一), “two” (二) and “three” (三) hasn't been changed too much, formed by horizontal line(s).

- *Yi* (一): *Shuowen Jiezi* didn't define the character “one” itself but explain to us that initially, the beginning of the formation of all things, “one” represented the heaven and the earth when they were not yet properly formed, when they were still unknown. But when the earth and the heaven began to be differentiated, all other things were formed too.

- *Er* (二): *Shuowen Jiezi* mentioned that the character “one” represent the heaven and the character “two” represent the earth. We can understand more concretely on the character “two”, because the top stroke represents the heaven, and the bottom stroke represents the earth.
- *San* (三): The number three is the combination of the heaven, the earth and humans, composed of three strokes. And these three elements can produce everything.

The ancient script form for number “one” is *yi* (弌), number “two” is *er* (弌) and number “three” is *san* (弌). When we mention the term “ancient script form”, for example the character “one” (弌), it refers to another way of ancient script form, not a character that is older in the era in which the character “one” was produced.

2. *Jiajie* numbers

And the next category from number four to ten is *jiajie*. Sometimes the etymology of a number is not clear so I will not mention it.

- *Si* (四): For the number four it's different, from oracle bone inscription to bronze inscription (金文) it was written by four horizontal lines as the number before (三), to represent two “number two” one above the other, but from *xiaozhuan* it has been written in square form 𠄎 and has been considered to a *jiajie*. *Shuowen Jiezi Zhu* explain that the square around of this character is like a four-sided, and the two strokes inside means separation, so the character represent a division into four corners. Also *Guangyun* (廣韻) indicate that this number is *jiajie* from the character *si* (泗). The ancient script form for number four is 𠄎.
- *Wu* (五): For the number five, the character was previously also been written with five horizontal lines, and they think that if it continues like this will not be a suitable idea, so later it has been changed to 𠄎. On *Shuowen Jiezi Zhu* the number five represents the five elements: metal, wood, water, fire and earth. Looking at the *xiaozhuan* form, both horizontal lines, as the number two, is the sky and the earth, and the cross which connects these two lines represent the Yin and the Yang which intersect with the earth and the sky. The ancient script form for number five (𠄎) is the ellipsis (省略) of the character number five.
- *Liu* (六) : Some oracle bone inscription philologist think that the character six has been *jiajie* from the character *ru* (入). But *Shuowen Jiezi Zhu* mentioned that the *xiaozhuan* form is a *huiyi* (會意) formed by the character *ru* (入) and *ba* (八). *Shuowen Jiezi* also

explain this number as a number from the *Book of Changes*, in which the character six corresponds to Yin.

- *Qi* (七): The oracle bone inscription and bronze inscription form of the character seven looks like nowadays regular style form of the character *shi* (十). But changed at *xiaozhuan* and the form of the number seven is categorized as Yang in the *Book of Changes*, which is composed by the character *yi* (一) indicating Yang, and 乚 shows a weak *yinqi* (陰氣) emerging obliquely from *yi* representing *yangqi* (陽氣). The character seven is the *chuwen* (初文) of the character *qie* (切), and was later divided into two characters.
- *Ba* (八): *Shuowen Jiezi* Zhu define the number “eight” as respectively, separately. The seal script (篆文) form resembles the fact of separating from each other. And later it has been *jiajie* as the number eight.
- *Jiu* (九): In the *Book of Changes* the character “nine” corresponds to a Yang character. The *xiaozhuan* form of the character looks like something that zigzags to an end point. When ancient people invent characters for numbers, they started from one and considered nine as an extreme. The form of oracle bone inscription and bronze inscription are relatively similar, its normally the original character of *zhou* (肘), that’s why it resembles to the form of the elbow of the arm.
- *Shi* (十): The number ten represents the perfect, complete sign among the numbers, because *Shuowen Jiezi* explain that the horizontal line represents East and West, and the vertical line is North and South. So these means East, West, North, South and the Center are all complete. At the beginning the oracle bone inscription form is only a vertical straight line, and at the bronze inscription form ancient people added a point in the middle maybe to differentiate with the character “one”, and later again at *xiaozhuan* they changed the point into horizontal line.

3. *Jiajie* of the character *bai* (白), *qian* (千) and *wan* (萬)

- *Bai* (百) : *Shuowen Jiezi* said the character “hundred” represents ten ten, it also belong to *jiajie* and the character is formed from the character *yi* (一) and *bai* (白). The ancient script form of the character “hundred” is formed from the character *zi* (自) rather than the character *bai*. The oracle bone inscription form of the character *bai* was used during the formation of the character “hundred”, and the basic meaning (本義) of the character *bai* refers to the sunrise light.

- *Qian* (千) : same logic as the character “hundred”, the character “thousand” signifies ten hundred and it’s a *jiajie* character developed with the character *shi* (十) and use the pronunciation of the character *ren* (人). For these two characters we don’t currently know what’s their basic meaning. In the oracle bone inscription form, they said that two hundred, three hundred and four hundred its written by adding another horizontal line.
- *Wan* (萬) : *Shuowen Jiezi* said the character “ten thousand” is an insect name, so the central meaning of the character is a scorpion, the oracle bone inscription form we can see a clear image with pincers and poisonous and bent spikes, when it comes to *xiaozhuan* we can still see the head shape. In addition, in ancient times the pronunciation of the character “thousand” and scorpion was identical.

III- Conclusion

On one hand, we learn that the formation of numbers in Chinese characters began with very simple horizontal lines, it was simply necessary to count the number of lines to know the number which corresponds to it, but then ancient people noticed that it was not a suitable idea, thus they began to use *jiajie*.

On the other hand, we can notice that Chinese numbers are not created all at once, because the first four numbers were developed as *zhishi* but then the other numbers were all *jiajie*, even though sometimes we did not yet know what their *chuwen* were.

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