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The development of the radical 皿 in *Shou Wen Jie Zi* 說文解字

I. Introduction

Food and drink have always been an essential part of human life. In *Shuowen Jiezi*, the radical 皿 includes 28 characters related to food vessels, among which 25 are standard forms and 3 are variant forms.

This presentation will make a diachronic comparison of the characters under the radical 皿 in *Shuo Wen*, *Er Ya*, *Kangxi Dictionary*, and modern dictionaries. It will sort out the changes in the inclusion of these characters and their semantic development from ancient to modern times.

II. Comparison with Ancient Dictionaries

1. Comparison with the *Er Ya*

Er Ya is the earliest known Chinese lexicon, compiled earlier than *Shuowen Jiezi*. It explains words by grouping together terms with similar meanings. The radical 皿 does not include many examples in *Er Ya*. The characters related to 皿 recorded in *Er Ya* are shown in the table:

Only five standard forms from the 皿 section of *Shuowen* appear in *Er Ya*. Since *Er Ya* focuses on word meanings, its collection is not as complete as *Shuowen*, which emphasises character analysis.

From the explanations, the two dictionaries also show differences in interpretation. For example, the character 盛 in *Er Ya* already has an extended meaning, explained as ‘intense fire.’ This shows that extended meanings had become common before the time of *Shuowen*. However, *Shuowen* still returns to the Small Seal Script form, interpreting the word as a specific sacrificial vessel. The other four characters follow the same pattern: *Shuowen* interprets based on the graphic structure, while *Er Ya* focuses on usage and meaning in context.

2. Comparison with *the Kangxi Dictionary*

Shuowen Jiezi originally established 540 radicals. With changes in later usage, Mei Yingzuo 梅膺祚 (fl.1615) in the Ming Dynasty reduced the number to 214 radicals. On this basis, *the Kangxi Dictionary* reorganised the radicals and the characters under them. Under the radical 𠂔, the *Kangxi Dictionary* includes 156 characters, and the changes compared with *Shuowen* can be divided into two types.

(1) Reduction – adjustment of radical classification

Although *Kangxi Dictionary* keeps all characters from the 𠂔 section of *Shuowen*, some characters are reassigned to different radicals. Two standard characters are moved: 醢 is reassigned to the radical 酉, and 齋 is reassigned to the radical 齊.

(2) Increase in the number of characters

Compared with *Shuowen*, the number of characters in *Kangxi Dictionary* increases greatly. A major reason is the large number of variant forms included. *Shuowen* records only three variant forms under the radical 𠂔. However, *Kangxi Dictionary* collects variant forms for twelve characters in the 𠂔 section, making the collection more complete.

The two dictionaries also differ in the way they place variant forms. *Shuowen* puts the variant form directly after the standard character, such as placing 𠂔 right after its standard character 𠂔. However, *Kangxi Dictionary* focuses more on radical classification. Some variant forms do not belong to the same radical in their structural form. For example, 𠂔 is followed by the variant form 𠂔, although the character 𠂔 is clearly not written with the 𠂔 radical. *Kangxi Dictionary* observes each character independently, and classifies them strictly according to their radicals. So, 𠂔 is placed under the radical 𠂔 in *Kangxi Dictionary*, and under the character 𠂔, it explains that the variant forms from *Shuowen* include 𠂔.

In addition, many of the new characters are younger forms, including newly created characters, variant forms, vulgar forms, and even wrong forms. For example, 𠂔 and 𠂔 look similar, some characters written from the radical 𠂔 were mistakenly written with the radical 𠂔. *Kangxi Dictionary* still includes all of them, and notes which are their standard characters.

Overall, *Shuowen* focuses on collecting standard characters and their supplementary notes; the *Kangxi Dictionary* aims at completeness in collecting all graphic forms, and precise categorisation of radicals.

III. Comparison with Modern Dictionaries

There are some differences in character usage across the Taiwan Strait. In Chinese mainland, *the Table of General Standard Chinese Characters* divides characters into three frequency levels: Level One for the most common and used in basic education, Level Two for less frequent characters, and Level Three for rare ones. In Taiwan, *the Revised Mandarin Dictionary* includes 35 characters under the radical 皿. When these are compared with the 25 standard characters under the radical 皿 in *Shuowen*, we can be reorganised into four analytical groups.

(1) Characters still used on both sides

There are twelve characters under the radical 皿 that remain in common use across both sides of the Taiwan Strait. Among them, 皿、盛、盆、益、盈 are Level One characters, while 盂、盎、醯、盞、盅、盥 are Level Two, and 盥 is Level Three. Many meanings have also changed over time. For example, the character 益 is now mainly used with its extended sense, and the original meaning “to overflow” is taken over by 溢. Likewise, 盞 has been replaced by 和 to indicate seasoning, and 醯 has been replaced by 醋 in daily use.

(2) Characters not shared in use

There are five characters that remain in use in Taiwan but are no longer used in Chinese Mainland, where they have either disappeared or been replaced by other characters.

(3) Characters no longer used on either side

Eight characters are no longer used in modern writing, including 齋、盥、盥、盥、盥、盥、盥、盥. Among them, 盥 is special because although the original form is no longer used, its meaning continues with new characters: Taiwan uses 盥 and Chinese mainland uses 盥. The remaining characters are not included in modern commonly used dictionaries.

(4) Newly added characters under the radical 皿

According to the *Revised Mandarin Dictionary*, seventeen new *min*-radical characters have been added in modern use. Among them, six belong to Level One: 盥、盥、盥、盜、盟、盥. The characters 盥、盥、盥、盥 were not recorded in *Shuowen*, while 盜、盟、盥 have undergone changes in their radical classification. 盜 originally belonged to the radical 次; 盟 was a variant of the character 盟 in the radical 囧; and 盥 belonged to the radical 臥. Following the system of the *Kangxi Dictionary*, all three are now classified under

the radical 皿.

IV. Conclusion

Through the comparison of 皿-radical characters in *Shuowen*, ancient lexicons, and modern dictionaries on both sides of the Taiwan Strait, we can reach three conclusions:

First, the semantic development of many characters shows a clear shift from concrete vessel functions to abstract meanings, reflecting social and cultural change.

Second, the *Kangxi Dictionary* placed greater emphasis on comprehensive collection and radical reclassification, creating differences from the original system in *Shuowen*. Modern dictionaries almost follow the categorisation of *Kangxi Dictionary*.

Third, modern character usage continues to simplify, replace, or even eliminate older forms, showing the natural evolution of written language and its adaptation to real communication needs.

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