



Trinity Saint David

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Provisional mark: NB. All marks are provisional until confirmed by the final examination board.	

Clothing Characters in Chinese Writing

Introduction

Clothing is an essential part of human living and civilization. From the earliest clothing made from animal skins and plant leaves to elaborate designs of Chinese empirical garments, clothing has been through many changes and developments.

Chinese characters are a tool for recording language. Because Chinese characters are a Xingsheng (形聲) writing system, unlike alphabetic writing systems, the script is independent of the spoken language. So many characters that we use today still resemble the original forms. And some Xiangxing (象形) characters can still show us information about the objects themselves through their shapes and forms. Since the earliest forms of Chinese writing, the oracle bone scripts, there have been characters about clothing. Through the evolution of Chinese characters, we can see part of the history and culture of Chinese clothing.

Characters With the “衣” Radical

衣 Yi: This is the “衣” character, meaning “clothing”. If we look at the shape of the original character, the oracle bone script (甲骨文), it looks just like ancient Chinese clothing. The upper center part is the collar; the two sides look like two wide sleeves. The lower part is where the two front pieces of the garment cross over and overlap one another. The ancient Chinese people wore their clothing with the left side wrapped over and covering the right side. This is called 右衽, and we can see this in the oracle bone script. So this character, 衣, is a Xiangxing (象形) character.

Shuowenjiezi 說文解字 defines this character as: “上曰衣, 下曰裳。”¹ So, “衣” is a general term for all upper garments. This [photo] is a commonly worn garment from the Han dynasty, and we can see how the character resembles the clothing.

裘 Qiu: This is the character 裘. This character existed very early, in the oracle bone script (甲骨文). And in its earliest form it looks like the 衣 character with strokes resembling hairs or fur on the outside, like a fur garment. In the bronze inscriptions, it is the same except a symbol is added to the center. This symbol looks kind of like the element for hand, but it also means that the garment is made from fur.

Shuowenjiezi 說文解字 says that 裘 means “皮衣” “fur clothing”². When this character 裘 evolved to Xiaozhuan (小篆), the strokes on the outside representing the fur were

¹ Duan Yu Cai 段玉裁, *Shuowen Jiezi Zhu* 說文解字注 (Taipei: Yiwen Yinshuguan Gufen Youxian Gongsi, 2015) p. 392

² Duan Yu Cai 段玉裁, *Shuowen Jiezi Zhu* 說文解字注 (Taipei: Yiwen Yinshuguan Gufen Youxian Gongsi, 2015) p. 402

written in the center. The components in some Chinese characters can often be rearranged like this. The “求” radical also acts as a phonetic element here. In Xiaozhuan (小篆), the character’s structure is outer/inner—the 求 is inside the 衣, while the character in regular style (楷書) has the 求 above and the 衣 below. This is what a 裘 garment looks like [photo].

蓑 Suo: This is the character “蓑”. This character in Xiaozhuan (小篆) is a “衣” with something that looks like grass in the center. *Shuowenjiezi* 說文解字 says that 蓑 is “艸雨衣” meaning it is a garment made of grass or hay and worn in the rain³. It is also a Xiangxing (象形) character, and it looks just like a garment with the “grass” symbol in the middle telling us what the garment is made of. The original character (衰) was borrowed, jiajie (假借). It means something different now, and for the original meaning of the character, which is a garment made of grass or hay, a “grass” radical was added on top to differentiate between the two characters. And the character we use today is 蓑.

表 Biao: This character, 表, look a little similar to 裘 in Xiaozhuan (小篆). Again, it is a 衣 character, and like 裘, it also has a component in the center. The part in the center is the character 毛, meaning hair or fur. The “毛” shows that the clothing is made from fur. The ancient Chinese wore fur clothing as outer garments, so 表 is clothing worn on the outside. So 表 is a Huiyi (會意) character. *Shuowenjiezi* 說文解字 explains 表 as: “上衣者，衣之在外者也。”⁴ It means that 表 refers to upper garments worn on the outside. That’s why 表 was later on used to mean on the outside or surface, which is the meaning that this character is mostly used for now.

裏 Li: This 衣 character has a 里 character added to the middle. The 里 is a phonetic element here. *Shuowenjiezi* 說文解字 explains 裏 as “內衣也。從衣里聲。”⁵ So 裏 is a Xingsheng 形聲 character. It means that 裏 is used to refer to clothing worn on the inside, so inner garments. But now this character is used for the meaning of “in” or “inside” and no longer used for its original meaning of clothing.

襦 Ru: This is the character 襦. There is a 衣 radical on the left and a 需 on the right as a phonetic element. *Shuowenjiezi* 說文解字 says 襦 means “短衣也。”⁶ meaning a

³ Duan Yu Cai 段玉裁, *Shuowen Jiezi Zhu* 說文解字注 (Taipei: Yiwen Yinshuguan Gufen Youxian Gongs, 2015) p. 401

⁴ Duan Yu Cai 段玉裁, *Shuowen Jiezi Zhu* 說文解字注 (Taipei: Yiwen Yinshuguan Gufen Youxian Gongs, 2015) p. 393

⁵ Duan Yu Cai 段玉裁, *Shuowen Jiezi Zhu* 說文解字注 (Taipei: Yiwen Yinshuguan Gufen Youxian Gongs, 2015) p. 394

⁶ Duan Yu Cai 段玉裁, *Shuowen Jiezi Zhu* 說文解字注 (Taipei: Yiwen Yinshuguan Gufen Youxian Gongs, 2015) p. 398

short garment. 襦 was a very common garment at the time and was worn with a long skirt.

Conclusion

This is only a very brief introduction of a few clothing-related Chinese characters. There are many more Chinese characters related to clothing to explore.

From looking at a few Chinese characters related to clothing, we can see that Chinese as a writing system records language and also the culture of the Chinese people. Because Chinese is mostly made up of Xiangxing 象形 characters, even though thousands of years have passed, we can still understand their meaning through the shape and form of the characters.

This concludes my presentation. Thank you for listening. Any feedback and suggestions would be appreciated.

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