

Philological Analysis and Cultural Connotation Research of "和(he)"

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Abstract. The character "和(he)" is extremely frequently used in Modern Chinese, with six different pronunciations and a rich array of meanings. As a core concept in traditional Chinese culture, it permeates every aspect of ancient society and has crystallized into unique values and ways of thinking. This paper, starting from the perspective of philology, systematically combs through the evolution of the character "和(he)" in terms of its form, pronunciation, and meaning, as well as its cultural connotations, including concepts such as "harmony in diversity" and "harmonious coexistence among all nations." The culture of "和" transcends time and space and still holds significant guiding value for modern society in handling diverse relationships. Inheriting and promoting the culture of "和(he)" is not only an inevitable requirement to safeguard the traditional wisdom of the Chinese nation but also a profound reflection of the shared values of humanity.

Keywords: "和(he)", glyph, culture, word meaning

1. Introduction

The concept of "和(he)" permeates traditional Chinese culture, family relations, social order, and even national governance. Over time, it has crystallized into a distinct value system and cognitive framework that continue to shape Chinese thought. Building on this foundation, this paper employs philological methods to analyze the character "和" through its evolving form, pronunciation, and semantics. Furthermore, it delves into the profound cultural connotations and historical values embedded within this conceptual framework, including principles such as "harmony in diversity" and "harmonious coexistence between civilizations".

2. The glyph analysis of "和(he)"

2.1. The physical evolution of the word "和(he)"

"和" is a commonly used character with a rich array of meanings. In the process of semantic evolution, it has developed a complex system of meanings. There are various pathways for semantic evolution, among which "metaphor"—the association between two similar things, and "metonymy"—the association between two related things, which form the basis of "semantic extension", are the most common types of evolutionary pathways.

"龠(hé)" is the ancient form of "和". In its oracle bone script form, the character 龠 consisted of three components. The left radical resembles multiple bamboo tubes of varying lengths, symbolizing a multi-pipe harmonizing instrument ("Yue: bamboo tubes with three holes, producing collective sounds [1]"). The upper component takes the shape of a "mouth" aligned with the lower "pipes". The right component depicts a seedling maturing into ears of grain, possibly indicating the instrument's sound was produced by blowing through plant stalks.

During the Zhou Dynasty, textual simplification led to the emergence of variant forms 𪛗 and 𪛘. The "mouth" component was simplified on the left side of "和", while two new forms resembling "木 (wood)" and "禾 (grain)" developed. Influenced by various factors such as the Spring and Autumn Period and the war and the fragmentation of various regions, the word "和" was amorphous during this period, and the position of the left and right structures was uncertain. Concurrently, as the ancient form 龠 remained in use, three distinct character variants coexisted at this stage.

During the Small Seal Script period, the character "和" was standardized as a left-right structure composed of "禾" and "口(mouth)", with simplified and refined strokes. Notably, Qin bamboo slips 𪛗 dating from the late Warring States to early Qin Dynasty periods show a configuration with "禾" on the right and "口" on the left. However, in the formal Small Seal Script, the character evolved to position "口" on the right and "禾" on the left, reflecting transitional changes preceding the Clerical Script development.

In the Clerical Script period, "和" achieved structural stabilization with fixed component positioning (rarely showing reversed arrangements) and developed characteristic horizontal flattening, closely resembling its modern form. The Regular Script stage introduced further standardization: square structural configuration and geometrically balanced strokes. This final evolution established the contemporary form of "和" that remains in use today.

2.2. "和(he)" and the homologous word

"味(he)", "盞(he)", and "龠(he)" are all cognates of "和". Among them, "味" is a variant character of "和", with both pronunciation and meaning. "和" and "盞, 龠", the two words' relationship, need to pay special attention to.

"Shuowen Jiezi" interprets: 龠, 盞, and 和 are three characters with the same pronunciation (he) [1]. "盞" refers to flavor seasoning, "和" indicates acoustic correspondence, while "龠" denotes musical harmony. All three characters use "禾" as their phonetic component, yet demonstrate distinct differences in form and semantic meaning.

However, classical texts show interchangeable usage of "盞" and "和". For instance, In the Shang Song, the ritual harmony is described: "There is also the harmonious soup, perfectly prepared and balanced [2]." (Classic of Poetry, "Liezu"). In the southern liang dynasty scholars Gu Ye king "jade" said: He, seasoning also. This shows that the character "和" gradually took over the meaning of "seasoning", while the ancient form "盞" was preserved.

"龠" and "和" were often used interchangeably in ancient texts. For example, in the Fu on the Panpipes, it is written: "Harmonizing with folk songs in mutual accord". Classical texts and commentaries generally used "和" in place of "龠". In the Book of Han, "Biography of the Preface, Part One", it states: "Have you not heard that the He Clan's Jade Disk was concealed within Jing stone, and the Marquis of Sui's pearl was hidden within a clam shell?". In later literature, the term "龠氏之璧" (He Clan's Jade Disk) came to be recorded as the more widely recognized "和氏之璧" (He Shi's Jade).

The above general situation is likely to be related to the common vocal side "禾(grain)". The character "禾" character oracle bone shape 𥽿, image from the grain valley. In the "Shuowen Jiezi", under the "Grain" radical: "禾 refers to fine grain [1]." In ancient China, the farming civilization was based on the small-scale farming economy, and the abundant food also means social stability. To the ancients, favorable weather, political harmony, and bountiful grain harvests were interconnected, leading "禾" to acquire connotations of "harmony". "盃, 和, 龠" all adopt "禾" as their phonetic element. Their distinct radicals—"皿(vessel)", "口(mouth)", and "龠(flute)"—imbue each with unique yet interrelated meanings.

Xu Kai of the Southern Tang Dynasty used "龠" to explain the relationship between "和" and "禾", indicating that the meanings of "禾", "和" and "龠" are closely related [3]. During the Qing Dynasty, Qian Dian proposed: "'和' means to respond in harmony. This is the character used for mutual response. For the harmony of musical instruments like the zither and these, the character '龠' should be used; for the harmony of a well-mixed soup, the character '盃' should be used" [4]. It points out that the meaning of the three words has a special department, can not be mixed. Duan Yucai, in his commentary on the character "盃" in the Shuowen Jiezi, wrote: "To harmonize sounds is termed '和'; to adjust flavors is called '盃'. Today, "和" is widely used, while '盃' and '和' have fallen into disuse" [5]. It indicates that the word "和" can express the meaning of the other two words. Guo Moruo pointed out that "和" and "龠" are the ancient and modern characters [6]. In *Bronze Inscriptions: A Comprehensive Analysis of Form and Meaning*, it is noted under the entry for the character "龠": "it has the same meaning as '和' but they are distinct characters. In classical texts, the character '和' is more commonly used" [7]. Wang Li regarded that "龠" and "和" was actually the same word [8]. Yin Jiming posited that the characters "和", "龠" and "盃" all carry the meanings of "harmony" and "conciliation," which are the common meanings derived from the phonetic component "禾". These meanings are the etymological origins conveyed by the phonetic element "禾" [9].

The author posits that the character "和" emerged later as a simplified form, while "和", "龠", and "盃" constitute cognate characters. During their subsequent evolution, "和" semantically absorbed the meanings of both "龠" and "盃", yet preserved their original graphic forms and distinct semantic functions. For instance, "盃" retains its specific denotation as a type of ancient ritual vessel, whereas "龠" persists in specialized contexts such as personal nomenclature.

3. The sound and meaning of "和(he)"

3.1. The rhyme book records the word "和(he)"

"和" in modern Chinese has six pronunciations: hé, hè, huò, huó, huō, and hú. In ancient rhyme dictionaries, the primary recorded pronunciations are "户戈切(hùgēqiē)" and "胡卧切(húwòqiē)".

Duan Yucai's annotated edition of "Shuowen Jiezi" clarifies: "'和' means to correspond or to harmonize. It is composed of the radical '口' and the phonetic component '禾'. In ancient times, the character for 'singing in harmony' was not pronounced in the departing tone. It is pronounced as 'Hu ge' and belongs to the 17th phonetic category."

A fragment from the "Yupian" (Jade Chapters) of the Southern Dynasties (Liang and Chen periods) states: "Hu ge. According to 'Shuowen Jiezi': '龠' means to adjust or to harmonize'... Now it is written as the character '和', under the 'mouth' radical."

The "Guangyun" (Guang Rhymes) from the Northern Song Dynasty and the "Jiyun" (Collected Rhymes) from Renzong's reign both clearly documented the two pronunciations of the character "和"

". The "Guangyun" states: "Hu ge(户戈切), nine, corresponding sound. Hu wo(胡卧切), also pronounced as '禾', three." The "Jiyun" also mentions: "'Hu ge', to correspond or to harmonize, six, 'Shuowen Jiezi' says to correspond, also a place name. 'Hu wo', also a surname, ancient texts use '和', fourteen."

Over time, through dynastic changes and the linguistic diversification across China's vast regions, "和" evolved into its current six pronunciations.

3.2. The word meaning system and meaning evolution of the word "和(he)"

"和" is a commonly used character with a rich array of meanings. In the process of semantic evolution, it has developed a complex system of extended meanings. There are various pathways for semantic evolution, among which "metaphor" (the association between similar things) and "metonymy" (the association between related things) form the basis of "semantic extension" and represent the most common types of evolutionary pathways [10].

The semantic genesis of the term "和" is anchored, as delineated within "Shuowen Jiezi," in the notion of vocal interplay during musical performance—its earliest referent embodying a kind of resonant response. From these origins it can be observed that the character's reach, no longer confined to the acoustical realm alone, underwent progressive enlargement, ultimately encompassing forms of dialogic reciprocity. Within literary praxis, such expansion became manifest especially in the poetic tradition: responses crafted not only by mirroring rhyme and theme, but also through subtle alignment with precedent texts crafted by another hand. The capacity displayed therein for adaptation, detectable across various contexts, presaged usages denoting assent or the granting of leave.

Anchored initially in the domain of musicology, "和" did, according to certain ancient sources, designate musical instruments antecedent to the more familiar "sheng": it was this emblematic value of harmonious interaction that permitted its application to sonorous devices orchestrating acoustic convergence in ensemble settings. To instances such as the bronze "chunyu"—in ritual militaria paired with war-drums as orchestral guides for coordinated movement—the designation "和" adhered; thus, in archaic vehicular arrangements, bells suspended from chariot crossbars assumed the appellation "和," while those fixed to shafts bore the name "luan." It is in lines drawn from the "Book of Songs," notably "和鸾雍雍," where an auditively evocative portraiture of their concordant timbre emerges most distinctly.

Musico-poetical conceptualizations encapsulated by "和" involved both group performance and segmentation within compositional form. Seen through Yang Shen's "Sheng'an Poetry Talks," structural parallels arose between indigenous practice and Westernized musical models: "序者，歌之先也；乱者，歌之后也." Such citation underscores the function attributed to prelude and coda, serving alike as articulatory boundaries which, bracket-like, frame the central melodic narrative.

The semantic elasticity manifested by the term "和" presents itself not solely within the confines of musical consonance but, through figurative extension, acquires further signifiatory range in delineating interpersonal consensus alongside psychological composure. Observed by Kong Yingda were these words: "In tolerance and magnanimity does harmony reside—discord being absent therein" [11]. Evident from this is that, as applied to relations between sovereign entities, "和," functioning emblematically, came gradually to denote both armistice and pacification. Identified as well in references to atmospheric conditions is "和"—its implication therein indicating temperance, removed equally from extremes of chill or heat, thereby instantiating most aptly that idolum of moderation so esteemed.

Discernible across ontological strata and contextual sites alike remains the complex notion of "协调" ("coordination"), a category into which "和" was appropriated and subsequently revered with philosophical distinction by premodern Chinese savants. Demonstrable throughout the lexicon is the phenomenon whereby lexical compounds incorporating "和," predominantly, signify affirmative valuations within their pragmatic functions.

Penetration into the manifold structures of social formation characterizes the positive valences attached to "和." Manifest in martial contexts are such resonances—in particular, military order owed frequently its idealization to intra-force unity under the denominational reference of "和," designating ceremonially the entranceway associated with ancient militaria encampments. Noteworthy is Pan Yue's "Western Expedition Rhapsody": "Authoritativeness and efficacy reflected through military comportment can be discerned, with the ornamented canopy set at what the camp termed 和." Referenced here stands an architectural detail—the endboard affixed upon coffins, named "和," distinguished for its function in linking disparate elements and imparting balance; analogy thus unfolds wherein structural stability is achieved via systemic coordination, attesting once more to conceptual extensions derived from material assemblage.

A conglomeration constituted by discrete auditory phenomena, assembled into a unifying ensemble characterized as harmonious, emerges not merely from arbitrary aggregation but through the intricate coalescence of variegated elements. The ideogram "和," whose ambiguity extends into mathematical discourse—entailing connotations of additive results—finds explication within such texts as employed in "Gougu Juyu: The Meaning of Sum and Difference"; therein articulated is the following proposition: "The sum of the legs of a right triangle represents that figure yielded upon the addition of those respective measures." Not confined to arithmetic synthesis alone does the significance of "和" reside, for its semantic terrain encompasses also the notion of felicitous conjunction, evinced via rites and practices where positive amalgamation predominates; exemplified can this be with reference to "The Book of Rites: The Special Sacrifice to the Suburban Altar"—a source in which it is maintained: "When yin and yang are consonant, the myriad entities exhibit prosperity."

Rooted etymologically is "和" within the vessel-type designated as "盎", tasked originally with the ceremonial homogeneous blending of wines; inferred therefrom becomes an association with gustatory moderation or mediated adjustment of flavors—a process whereby composite properties achieve optimum modulation. Signification thus extended underwent further metaphorization—shifting towards concepts relating to temperance in social affairs and structured regulation, eventually encompassing reciprocal transactions antecedent to economic equity. It was Yin Zhizhang who offered clarification, noting succinctly: "'和' expresses equitable trading; negotiations conducted at the market attend advantageously to numerous participants."

Within routine vernacular deployments, the term "和" manifests a triadic extension of semblances: At first instance, attention must be drawn to the act wherein pulverized components, susceptible to dispersal, undergo manipulative agitation resulting in amalgamative cohesion. Observable is such a phenomenon during pharmaceutical preparation, when individual herbs require water-induced commingling—a procedure denominated as "一和药," referencing the preliminary medicinal mixture. Through subsequent usage, "和" acquires functionality analogous to a classifier denoting specific iterative acts of decoction. Attention shifts secondly to discursive contexts wherein falsity interpermeates veracity, inaugurating thereby conditions suitable for deception or willful obfuscation. Thirdly occupies mention the gaming sphere of mahjong; whenever self-held tiles attune precisely with prescribed victory configurations, occurrence is named as "和," signifying attainment of a winning state.

Chinese function words generally evolve from real words, and the meaning of function words is extended from the meaning of real words [12]. The verb of "和" has the meaning of "confluence and together", which naturally turns into a conjunction in the use of language. "和" is a preposition, indicating the relationship between converging and following objects, and introducing the service object, equivalent to "给(give)"; it can also represent the object, direction, etc., the same as "跟(follow)", and indicates the correlation and comparison between objects, equivalent to "同(same)".

4. The cultural connotation contained in the word "和(he)"

"和" deduces and points to "the harmonious state of various relations" from the sound harmony and harmony of the original meaning. The concept of "和" forms a unique value concept and way of thinking, which is reflected in multiple dimensions such as individual, family, society, country and even the universe. The philosophy of "和" has become a model of dealing with interpersonal relations, moral standards and behavior norms, and the criterion of governing the country, and is an important key word in traditional Chinese thought.

As early as the late Western Zhou Dynasty, Grand Historian Shi Bo proposed the seminal doctrine: "Harmony ('和') generates vitality; uniformity ('同') leads to stagnation." Shi Bo conceptualized "和" as the dynamic equilibrium achieved through integration of disparate elements, enabling their flourishing coexistence. Conversely, "enhancing uniformity through uniformity" would result in systemic collapse—"ultimate abandonment."

In the pre-Qin period, Both Daoist and Confucian schools during the pre-Qin period elevated "和" as central to their philosophies. The "Daodejing" says: "All things are negative Yin and embrace Yang, angry think peace." Laozi believes that all things arise in the intersection of Yin and Yang and qi, and "和" refers to the state of the unity of Yin and Yang, which can be understood as the circle of Taiji diagram, which reflects the values of Chinese peoples pursuit of harmony, balance and unity.

The concept of "和" is also reflected in Confucianism in the moral principles and the importance of governing a country. Confucius believed that "the gentleman is harmonious without uniformity, and the villain is the same without uniformity" (The Analects of Confucius), and regarded "harmony without uniformity" as an important "dividing line" between "gentleman" and "villain". Later, the philosophical connotation of "harmony without uniformity" was expanded, which was not only used to describe the virtue of the gentleman, but also developed into the way of the king and the minister and the wisdom of the world.

"和" is one of the important dimensions of the ideal social order advocated by Confucianism. In the Book of History, the concept of "harmony with all nations" is mentioned, and in the Analects of Confucius, it further discusses that "the use of propriety is the most valuable. The way of the first king is beauty, small big." regards "harmony is most valuable "as the way of governing the country, and the purpose of the ritual and music system is" harmony ". Only when the people live in harmony can the country prosper, that is, in the Book of Rites, the Doctrine of the Mean: "To peace, heaven status, and all things grow.

Transcending ancient philosophy, "和" remains vital in modern global governance. China's advocacy for "peace, development, cooperation, and win-win solutions" to address shared human challenges reflects this cultural legacy—ensuring equitable progress through harmonious coexistence.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, the word "和" has gone through the evolution of oracle bone inscriptions, gold script, small seal script, official script and regular script, and the complex character construction components are gradually simplified. "和" has rich meanings, and its concept runs through all levels of Chinese society, becoming a unique wisdom of Chinese philosophy. Moving forward, continued exploration and transmission of "和" culture will amplify its global significance.

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