

The Philological Origins of the Concepts of "Zhong" and "He"

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Abstract: From the perspectives of philology and intellectual history, this paper explores the evolution of the concepts of "Zhong" (中) and "He" (和) and their roles in shaping the philosophy of "Zhong-He" (Harmony and Moderation). By analyzing the development of glyphs and semantic meanings in oracle bone script and bronze inscriptions, it reveals how "Zhong" symbolizes spatial centrality and the principle of moderation, while "He" extends its significance to harmony in sound and social relationships. The article further elaborates on the complementary nature of the early semantics of "Zhong" and "He" and the process of their conceptual integration, especially as manifested in Confucian classics. By tracing the transformation of "Zhong" and "He" from independent concepts to a systematic philosophical doctrine, the study argues that the philosophy of "Zhong-He" represents a synthesis of static order and dynamic coordination, serving as a fundamental theoretical pillar in Chinese civilization across social, philosophical, and ethical dimensions.

Keywords: Bronze Inscriptions, Evolution of Characters, He(和), Oracle Bone Script, Zhong(中), Zhong-He Philosophy.

1. Introduction

The origin of Chinese characters remains a debated topic in academia. However, many scholars agree that Oracle Bone Script represents a highly developed writing system with relatively stable structural forms, significant ideographic functions, and fundamental grammatical rules. This system preserves rich cultural information and semantic codes from ancient times, providing a crucial foundation for understanding the early thoughts of Chinese civilization. The scribes of Oracle Bone inscriptions, the "巫" (shamans) and "史" (historians), can be regarded as the first intellectuals and thinkers in China's recorded history.

Following the Five Emperors, the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties emerged. While the Xia dynasty's history remains elusive, the Oracle Bone inscriptions reflect the collective knowledge and intellectual state of the Yin-Shang period, particularly of a group engaged in spiritual activities distinct from daily life[1]. Based on this, exploring the origins of "Zhong" (中) and "He" (和) in Oracle Bone Script and analyzing their comparison with Shang-Zhou Bronze Inscriptions help to delve into the trajectory and substance of early Chinese thought.

A review of Oracle Bone and Bronze Inscription materials reveals that the characters "Zhong" and "He" both appear in these scripts but had not yet developed into the combined expression "Zhong-He" (Moderation and Harmony). This phenomenon offers an opportunity to investigate the early meanings of "Zhong" and "He" in the history of thought and lays a foundation for uncovering their semantic evolution across different historical periods.

2. Philological Analysis of the Character "Zhong" (中)

2.1. The Fundamental Meaning and Structural Composition of "Zhong"

The form of the character "Zhong" (中) intuitively represents the internal position of a space or object, located at the center between left and right or top and bottom. Its original meaning is "middle" or "center." Xu Shen, in the *Shuowen Jiezi*, explains: "Zhong (中) means 'inner.' It is composed of 'kou' (口) and a vertical stroke (丨) passing through from top to bottom." Here, "inner" indicates that "Zhong" conveys the concept of the inner part or the central position. The inclusion of the "kou" (口) component reflects its structural element, while the vertical stroke (丨) that penetrates from top to bottom illustrates the character's centrality and its ability to connect different sides.

Xiao Xu (Xu Kai) further elaborates in the *Shuowen Jiezi Xizhuan*: "Zhong (中) also means 'he.' It is composed of 'kou' (口) and a vertical stroke (丨) passing through from top to bottom. Xu Kai stated: 'The mouth (口) issues commands, while the vertical stroke (丨) marks the center. The Way of the Imperial Mean (Huangji) proceeds from top to bottom, enabling connection between upper and lower realms. The Imperial Mean represents the Great Middle.' He also remarked: 'To bend without losing the center. The Xici of the Yi Jing says, 'Its words are bending yet centered.'" Here, Xu Kai extends the meaning of "Zhong" to encompass "harmony," suggesting that "Zhong" not only signifies the middle or inner position in space but also embodies the ideas of harmony and balance. This concept of connecting the upper and lower realms to achieve harmony further imbues "Zhong" with characteristics of fairness and impartiality, particularly relevant in the realms of politics and governance.

Duan Yucai noted in his *Shuowen Jiezi Zhu*: "Zhong (中)

means 'inner.' In some vernacular contexts, it also means 'harmony.' Zhong distinguishes itself from 'outer' and 'biased'. It also conveys the idea of appropriateness." Duan explicitly clarified the oppositional meaning of "Zhong" relative to "outer" and "biased," emphasizing its spatial role in delineating the internal from the external. He further highlighted its connotations of fairness, justice, and appropriateness.

In summary, the form of the character "Zhong" (中) not only reflects a spatial central position but is also imbued with abstract meanings of harmony, fairness, and appropriateness.

2.2. The Evolution of the Character "中" in Oracle Bone Script and Bronze Inscriptions

2.2.1. The Form and Function of Oracle Bone Script

In Oracle Bone Script (covering the scope of Compilations of Oracle Bone Inscriptions 1–13) [2], the character "中" has three main forms: A, B, and C.

Form A: A primitive pictograph, with its structure primarily composed of straight lines, accompanied by ribbons at the top and bottom.

Form B: Based on Form A, a symbolic indicator is added between the ribbons to emphasize the meaning of "center" or "middle."

Form C: A more simplified form, consisting of a vertical line ("|") and an enclosing framework, symbolizing the concept of spatial centrality.

Regarding the interpretation of Form A, Mr. Tang Lan suggested in his work Notes on Inscriptions from the Yin Ruins: Explanation of "中" [3] that it initially served as a clan emblem in tribal society, used to gather people and erected centrally as a symbol. Over time, Form A evolved to convey the concept of "central" or "middle" and gradually extended to meanings such as "the center between top and bottom" or "the center between large and small." Furthermore, Mr. Qiu Xigui [4] and Professor Huang Dekuan [5] pointed out that Form A might symbolize a wind-measuring tool, with its top and bottom ribbons used to observe wind direction. Form B then indicates the central position, while Form C is a simplified form expressing the abstract meaning of "middle."

This article argues that Form A represents a "flag" erected in a central position. Such flags not only served as markers but were also used to determine wind direction, playing a significant role in wind divination activities. According to the statistical analysis of oracle bone inscriptions, Form A appears with the lowest frequency, Form C ranks second, and Form B appears most frequently, indicating that Form B gradually became the dominant form of the character "中."

2.2.2. The Context of Usage of "中" in Oracle Bone Script

In oracle bone divination inscriptions, the character "中" appears 297 times and is primarily used in the following ways:

As a wind-measuring tool: The character "中" is often used to describe a flag employed for wind measurement and is frequently combined with the character "立" to form "立中" (erect the flag for wind measurement). For example:

Bingzi day: "Erect the flag (中), is there no wind? The next day..." (丙子立中无风? 易日.....Compilations, 40345).

[Uncertain character] You divination: "Prognostication: Will the following Bingzi day be suitable to erect the flag (中)? Indeed, there will be no wind." (酉卜, 贞: 翌丙子其立

中? 允亡风。Compilations, 7370).

These divination inscriptions indicate that the Shang people used "erecting the flag" (立中) to assess weather conditions, aligning their activities with ritual or military needs.

Referring to the central position in space: Since the wind-measuring flag was set up in the center of an open area, "中" further extended to signify the central position in space. For example:

Dingyou day: "The king establishes three divisions: right, center, left." (丁酉贞, 王作三师: 右中左。Compilations, 33006).

The Shang army was divided into three divisions: left, center, and right, with "中" clearly referring to the central army.

Used as a personal name or title: In the divination inscriptions, "中" is also used as a personal name or official title:

Wushen day: "Zhong divination: The king's envoy is extended, no fault." (戊申卜, 中贞: 王宾延, 无尤。Compilations, 22587).

Here, "中" refers to the name of the diviner, reflecting the identity function of "中" in a specific context.

2.2.3. The Character "中" in Bronze Inscriptions

In the bronze inscriptions of the Shang and Zhou dynasties [6], the character "中" appears 261 times, mostly used to represent personal names, clan names, or state names. At least 20 bronze inscriptions featuring the "中" clan emblem exist [7], such as: "Zhong Naou" (Compilations, 367), "Chizhi Zhongzu Zhi" (Compilations, 6213), "Zhongfu Xin Jue" (Compilations, 8630), "Zhongzuo Lü Gui" (Compilations, 3377), "Zhong Fang Ding" (Compilations, 2751), and "Zhongbo Hu" (Compilations, 9668). In these examples, "中" is used as a personal name, clan name, or state name [8]. There are also instances where "中" denotes the central geographic or spatial location.

In the He Zun, unearthed in 1965 from Baoji County, Shaanxi Province (Compilations, 6014), an inscription of 122 characters is cast on the bottom of the vessel, which includes the phrase "余其宅兹中国, 自之义民." Mr. Yu Shengwu suggested that here, "中国" functions as a directional and geographical term, meaning "the center of the world" [9]. The phrase "立中廷" (Compilations, 2783) refers to standing in the center of the court, where "廷" was the place where ancient emperors received audiences and conducted state affairs. "中廷" appears 106 times in the Compilations.

In the bronze inscriptions of the Shang and Zhou dynasties, "中" also came to represent the abstract concept of "moderate" or "appropriate." For example, in the inscription of the Cai Hou Bell unearthed in Shou County, Anhui (Compilations, 210), it reads "既聪于心, 诞中厥德," and in the inscription on the Shu Shi Bell (Compilations, 272), it says "慎中厥罚" and "中布明刑."

2.3. The Extended Meaning and Cultural Connotation of "中"

The temporal meaning of "中" in oracle bone script appears in phrases like "中日" or "日中," for example:

Within the ten-day period, the king suffers from a headache, and there is snow at midday.(旬有崇, 王疾首, 中日雪。

Compilations, 13613).

"中日" refers to the middle of the daytime, corresponding to the modern concept of "noon." This usage indicates that "中" already possessed the abstract ability to distinguish time periods, further deepening the concept of the center or core.

In addition, in Shang dynasty divination inscriptions, "商" (Shang) is often mentioned alongside "中," viewing "商" as the center of the world. For example:

Si day: "The king divines, is the divination for the center of Shang regarding the proper direction?" (巳卜, 王, 贞于中商乎御方。Compilations, 20453).

"商" as "中商" emphasizes its central position in the order of the four directions. This concept laid the foundation for the later idea of "the center of the world" (天下之中).

The evolution of the character "中" from its basic meaning to its forms in oracle bone script and bronze inscriptions not only demonstrates the process of concretizing and abstracting its spatial meaning but also reflects the multi-layered cultural connotations of "中" in ancient society. As part of the Chinese writing system, "中" evolved from a wind-measuring tool to the central space, and later to abstract concepts such as center, harmony, and justice, ultimately forming profound philosophical and political significance.

3. Lexical Analysis of the Character "和"

In *Shuowen Jiezi* (Explanations of Characters), the definition of the character "和" in the Kou (mouth) section is given as: "和, to correspond; it is composed of '口' (mouth) and '禾' (grain), with a sound." Its original meaning is mutual correspondence, specifically the harmonious coordination of tones. Duan Yucai, in his *Shuowen Jiezi Zhu* (Notes on *Shuowen Jiezi*), Volume 2, Part 2, Yue Bu (Supplement to Music), pointed out: "This is synonymous with the harmony of sounds in the Kou section, and in classical texts, '和' is often used in place of '龠'." Zhu Junsheng also mentioned in *Tongxun Dingsheng* (A Study of Phonology) that "和" is a borrowing for "龠."

This indicates that the ancient people often used "和" to replace "龠." In the *Shuowen Jiezi* Yue Bu section, it explains: "龠, to adjust; it is composed of '龠' (flute) and '禾' (grain), with a sound. It is read the same as '和'." The character "龠" derives its meaning from "龠," which in oracle bone and bronze inscriptions is depicted as the image of a bamboo pipe used in wind instruments. The *Shuowen Jiezi* Yue Bu further explains: "龠 is a bamboo pipe used in music, with three holes to harmonize the sounds of many." The three-holed flute mentioned here is a later form, while earlier versions of the "龠" were similar to a pan flute, composed of multiple bamboo pipes of varying lengths, capable of producing different pitches that needed to be harmonized. Thus, the original meaning of "龠" is to harmonize different pitches and timbres.

Although the characters "和" and "龠" have different forms, they are closely related in meaning. Both are derived from "禾" for their phonetic component, and their original meanings both involve the harmony of sounds. Guo Moruo believed that "和" and "龠" are ancient and modern forms of the same word [10], while Wang Li regarded them as essentially the same word [11].

3.1. "和" and "龠" in Oracle Bone Script and Bronze Inscriptions

In oracle bone script, the character "和" is not recorded, but the character "龠" appears in two instances: "贞上甲龠众唐" and "勿龠..." where "龠" is used as a sacrificial term [12].

In the bronze inscriptions of the Shang and Zhou dynasties, the character "和" appears in three instances. For example, "史孔和" (Compilations, 10352) and "邵宫和" (Compilations, 10357), both of which are names of bronze vessels.

In a bronze inscription on a vessel from the State of Zhongshan during the Warring States period, it reads: "惟朕先王, 苗蒐田猎, 于彼新土, 其会如林, 驭右和同、四牡沘沘, 以取鲜羹, 飨祀先王." The meaning is that the charioteer and the right driver work in harmony, with the four horses running quickly and in sync. Here, "和" signifies harmony and coordination.

In contrast, the character "龠" appears more frequently in bronze inscriptions, with a total of 31 instances, and has a rich range of meanings. From a structural perspective, "龠" is closely associated with music. In bronze inscriptions, "龠" is often used to describe bronze musical instruments such as bells and gongs. For example:

Yigong made the Chu clan's "He" bell. (益公为楚氏龠钟。Yigong Bell, Xiwan, Compilations, 16).

On the first month of the king's reign, with the auspicious time in the Dinghai day, Zhu Gong Sun Ban selected the best bronze for his 'He' gong, to express joy for his imperial ancestors. (唯王正月, 辰在丁亥, 邾公孙班择其吉金, 为其龠搏, 用喜于其皇祖。Zhu Gong Sun Ban Gong, Chunwan, Compilations, 140).

In addition, "龠" is also used to describe social harmony. For example, "龠于政" (Shi Qiang Pan, Xi Zhong, Compilations, 251), "龠胤士" (Qin Gong Zhong, Chunzao, Compilations, 262), "龠整民人" (Wang Sun Yizhe Zhong, Chunwan, Compilations, 261), "协龠万民" (Qin Gong Bo, Chunzhong, Compilations, 270), and "康协龠好" (Cai Hou Shen Pan, Chunwan, Compilations, 6010), where it conveys the meanings of coordination and harmony.

Through the above examples, it can be seen that "龠" is more commonly used to describe the harmony of music and society.

3.2. The Divergence in the Usage of "和" and "龠"

A comparison of the historical usage of "和" and "龠" reveals that the character "和" first appeared in the bronze inscriptions of the Shang and Zhou dynasties and has continued to be used up to the present day, while the character "龠" is recorded in oracle bone script from the Shang dynasty and became popular in the bronze inscriptions of the Zhou dynasty. However, there is no strict differentiation in their usage in context, and they can be used interchangeably. For example, in the bamboo slips of the Warring States period from the state of Chu, the character "和" appears frequently, while "龠" almost disappears [13]. Below are relevant examples from the Warring States Chu bamboo slips:

The harmony of sounds and voices, the following of one another in succession. (音声之相和也, 先后之相随也。

Guodian Bamboo Slips - Laozi, Jia Slip 16) [14].

A good people will surely be prosperous, but prosperity does not necessarily bring harmony. Without harmony, there is no peace; without peace, there is no joy.(善者民必富，富未必和，不和不安，不安不乐。Guodian Bamboo Slips - Zunde Yi, Slip 27).

Let the virtuous brothers lead, and the common people will live in harmony. When they are strong and brave, they will reverently and successfully govern the state.(任仁兄弟，庶民和同。方壮方武，穆穆克邦。Qinghua Bamboo Slips - Qi Ye, Slip 4) [15].

The above examples from the Warring States period Chu bamboo slips all use the character "和" to express the meanings of "harmony" and "coordination," without the appearance of the character "龢." This indicates that by the Warring States period, the character "和" had begun to fully replace "龢," becoming the main character in the Chinese writing system to express the concept of "harmony."

4. The Combination of "中" and "和" and the Formation of the Concept of "Zhonghe"

From a lexical perspective, the independent development of "中" and "和" in oracle bone script and bronze inscriptions reflects the core ideas of early Chinese thought. As previously analyzed, "中" serves as a spatial marker and a principle of measurement, while "和" extends its function to sound coordination and social relationships. Although the semantic evolution of these two characters occurred independently, their intrinsic concepts gradually formed a complementary ideological framework.

The character "中" appears in oracle bone script in the form of a wind-measuring flag, with its basic meaning being "middle" or "center," extending to a clear understanding of space and position. In bronze inscriptions, as the social structure became more complex, the meaning of "中" further abstracted, representing the pursuit of order, moderation, and proper placement. This evolution not only reflects the ancient people's observation and utilization of natural phenomena but also highlights their attention to social balance and structural stability. On the other hand, the character "和" originally appeared in oracle bone script in the form of "龢," referring to the coordination of tones, primarily used in music, rituals, and other contexts. In bronze inscriptions, "和" gradually transcended its specific function of sound coordination, widely encompassing the meaning of social harmony and the reconciliation of interpersonal relationships.

Although "中" and "和" were never used together in oracle bone script and bronze inscriptions, their functions and connotations naturally complement each other. The fundamental connection between the two lies in their focus on "balance" and "order." "中" emphasizes static proper placement and moderation, focusing on the internal stability of individuals or systems; while "和" focuses on dynamic coordination and symbiosis, emphasizing the relational balance between individuals or systems. The combination of static and dynamic elements forms the basic logic of the concept of "Zhonghe."

The practical logic reflected in early oracle bone script and bronze inscriptions laid the foundation for the later development of the concept of "Zhonghe." From the wind-

measuring activity of "立中" in the oracle bone inscriptions to the musical harmony of "龢钟" in the bronze inscriptions, the ancient understanding of "中" and "和" was continually deepened. During the Warring States period, "中" and "和," as independent core concepts, began to merge within philosophical systems. Confucian classics, such as the Li Ji: Zhongyong (The Book of Rites - Doctrine of the Mean), integrate the principle of moderation in "中" with the spirit of coordination in "和," proposing the idea of "致中和，天地位焉，万物育焉" (achieving Zhonghe, where heaven and earth are positioned and all things are nurtured), clearly explaining the significance of the concept of Zhonghe in both cosmic order and social practice.

5. Conclusion

From the evolution of characters to thought, "中" and "和" respectively embody the Chinese civilization's exploration and pursuit of order and harmony. When "中" provides the static value foundation and "和" offers the dynamic path for its realization, the combination of the two not only establishes the theoretical basis for the concept of Zhonghe but also builds the far-reaching influence of Chinese culture in the realms of philosophy, politics, and social ethics.

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