

The Representation of Ancient Chinese Currency Culture in the “Bei” Section of Shuowen Jiezi

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Abstract: As a foundational work of Chinese character graphology and ancient Chinese lexicology, *Shuowen Jiezi* records a large number of ancient Chinese character patterns and their interpretations and provides valuable documents for the study of ancient Chinese numismatic culture. This paper focuses on the part of the character “bei” (shell) in *Shuowen Jiezi* and reveals the status and evolution of the “bei” character and its related character families in the ancient monetary system through detailed glyph research and semantic analysis. In this paper, the evolution of the character “bei” from a medium of shell exchange to a symbol of wealth and monetary value is carried out, and the practical application and value standard of the character “bei” in ancient economic activities are reconstructed, and the role of the character “bei” in the naming and use of ancient coins is accurately defined. The research results not only provide a new perspective and theoretical basis for the study of paleography and monetary history, but also have important significance for understanding the symbolic carrier function of Chinese characters in commercial culture, as well as the economic structure and currency circulation mechanism of ancient society.

Keywords: Shuowen Jiezi, Chinese character, currency.

1. Introduction

As the first systematic dictionary in China, *Shuowen Jiezi* established the radical classification of Chinese characters and provided an important foundation for later studies on Chinese characters [1]. Specifically, the number and frequency of using bei indicates its importance in ancient economic and trade activities. The shape of the character “bei” is closely related to wealth, commodity value and social etiquette, reflecting the economic life and cultural concepts of ancient society. Although there have been studies on the symbolic meaning of “bei” and its position in ancient currency culture, it is still insufficient to analyze its specific etymology, semantic classification and cultural connotation.

In this paper, we first provide an overview of the *Shuowen Jiezi*, outlining the dictionary’s classification and definitions of characters. We then delve into the life and background of Xu Shen, the author of *Shuowen Jiezi*, laying the groundwork for a cultural interpretation of the character “bei”. Following this, we conduct a thorough analysis of the “bei” radical, focusing on its morphological changes through the evolution of Chinese characters and its economic functions. Additionally,

archaeological findings contribute to our understanding of the close relationship between the “bei” character and the development of currency.

This paper focuses on the connection between the “bei” radical in Chinese characters and the culture of currency. Through the textual research of “bei”, this paper analyzes its practicability and symbolic meaning as currency in ancient times. The introduction of the character “bei” not only reflected the needs of economic activities, but also witnessed the formation of ancient cultural values. For example, in various literatures, shells are often associated with wealth and exchange, becoming significant symbols in the economic perception of ancient people. The relevant archaeological data also provide us with intuitive evidence, which fully explains the important role of “bei” in the early commodity economy.

Overall, by deeply exploring the “bei” radical in *Shuowen Jiezi* and its connection to ancient Chinese currency culture, this paper not only reveals the complex relationship between language and economy but also offers new perspectives and insights into the socio-economic life of ancient societies. It is hoped that this research will inspire scholars and researchers in related fields, fostering broader and more in-depth scholarly work.

2. Overview of *Shuowen Jiezi*

Shuowen Jiezi, authored by Xu Shen during the Eastern Han Dynasty, was completed around the year 100 AD. This dictionary systematically elucidates the form, sound, and meaning of Chinese characters, pioneering a method of categorizing characters based on their phonetic and formative elements. Its significance lies not only in linguistics but also in cultural studies, closely linked to the evolution of ancient Chinese characters and their socio-cultural context. Around 2500 BC, shells were first used as a form of currency in China, marking the beginning of ancient Chinese currency culture. Against this backdrop, Xu Shen paid special attention to characters related to “bei”, delving into their evolution and usage on artifacts such as bronze ware and silk. The “bei” radical includes many terms associated with currency transactions and symbols of wealth, reflecting early economic practices and social structures.

The basic structure of *Shuowen Jiezi* embodies its systematic and logical compilation. It is divided into 540 radicals, with the “bei” radical highlighting its importance in the currency culture, comprising 36 characters. Each character’s description involves not only its form and pronunciation but also the evolution of its meaning and historical context, providing readers with a comprehensive understanding of the term’s implications.

Literature review is a key methodology in *Shuowen Jiezi*, especially evident in the analysis of the “bei” radical. The text explores ancient coinage styles and their evolution, comparing bronze coins from the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods with the five-baht coins of the Han Dynasty, offering detailed insights into their design and minting processes. For example, the character for “qian” (money) not only reflects its material aspect but also embodies social values associated with wealth, exchange, and standards of value.

The extension of meanings for characters is approached analytically, revealing their multifaceted significances. The character “zhen”, used in the context of currency transactions, not only denotes a type of transaction but also conveys the ancient Chinese value placed on integrity. Through meticulous examination of these characters, one can clearly understand how ancient currency culture influenced interpersonal relationships and economic activities.

3. Overview of the “Bei” Radical

3.1. Composition and Categories of the “Bei” Radical

“The “bei” radical holds significant cultural and historical importance in the construction of Chinese characters, primarily related to ancient currency and associated economic activities. In terms of form, characters with the “bei” radical typically incorporate the “bei” radical alongside other elements to create meanings specific to money, trade, and economic exchanges. For example, characters such as “fan” (to trade) and “hui” (bribe) are directly linked with currency and transactional activities. In the realm of character formation, the composition of “bei” not only symbolizes material wealth but also reflects cultural contexts of goods exchange and property circulation [2].

From a categorical perspective, the “bei” radical characters can be divided into several types: one type directly relates to coins and property, such as “bi” (currency), “huo” (goods), and “gu” (merchant). Another category includes characters associated with the concepts of value and exchange, like “zei” (thief), “hui” (bribe), and “pei” (compensate). Additionally, there are characters closely linked to business and trading behaviors, such as “gou” (buy) and “fan” (sell). These characters typically convey specific economic meanings, and their formation reflects the ancient societal emphasis on transactions and wealth.

Etymological studies indicate that the “bei” radical was originally related to seashells, which ancient peoples used as currency, gradually evolving into a symbol of the economy. The history of Chinese characters integrates natural objects and social practices, positioning the “bei” radical as a crucial player in socio-economic activities, making it an indispensable part of the Chinese writing system. The character “gu”, for example, portrays the image of an ancient merchant, with the top part representing goods and the bottom “bei” indicating direct relations with wealth transactions.

Furthermore, archaeological findings suggest that the use of the “bei” radical varied over different historical periods, reflecting changes in economic systems, land reforms, and the history of currency circulation. Research on the “bei” radical characters provide a critical perspective for deciphering ancient Chinese economic culture, extending beyond mere changes in character forms to delve into the intertwined historical and social contexts.

Overall, the composition and categories of the “bei” radical characters played a pivotal role in driving economic trade, shaping social identities, and forming value concepts in ancient Chinese script. They are not only components of language but also witnesses to history, carrying rich economic, cultural, and social information.

3.2. Semantic Evolution and Character Analysis

The “bei” radical played a crucial role in the symbolism and form in ancient Chinese currency culture. Morphologically, the structure of the “bei” character is derived from a seashell, embodying symbols of wealth, transactions, and value [3]. Historical literatures show that the “shell” radical was closely associated with currency across various historical periods. During the Shang and Zhou dynasties, the elite commonly used bronze and jade items, while seashells, as primitive currency symbols, began appearing in oracle bone inscriptions, evidencing their role as mediums of exchange.

The evolution of the “bei” character can be traced back to the Small Seal Script. In this script, the “bei” character was simplified but still retained the essential features of a shell, consistent with later evolutions into Clerical and Regular scripts. In the Clerical script, the strokes of the “bei” character were simplified into a structure of intersecting horizontal and vertical lines, reflecting the evolution of writing tools and habits. The transformation of character forms was not only an aesthetic choice but also a practical consideration.

Semantically, the “bei” character extends beyond the seashell itself to encompass meanings of wealth and transactions. Derived characters such as “hui” (bribe) and “shang” (reward) all reflect concepts related to monetary and goods exchange. This semantic evolution is closely linked to socio-economic development, especially during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods when there was frequent economic interaction among the states, prompting a shift in the perception of currency and its nomenclature.

Archaeological discoveries have unearthed various ancient coins bearing the “bei” radical, such as the “half liang” coins from the Zhongshan state and the “Circular Coin with a Square Hole” from the Qin Dynasty. These artifacts demonstrate the practical application of “bei” in currency forms, enriching records of ancient economic activities. Additionally, ancient literatures like *Guanzi* discuss the role of shells as a medium of exchange, further corroborating their historical implementation.

A comprehensive analysis of the semantic and morphological evolution of the “bei” radical characters highlight how ancient Chinese understood and utilized currency symbols in economic activities. “bei” serves not only as a carrier of character forms but also as a historical witness to ancient trade practices and economic development. Studying the development of the “bei” radical characters help deepen our understanding of the economic structures and social interactions of ancient societies, providing crucial documentary evidence and empirical support for studies of ancient currency culture.

4. The Relationship between Bei and Money Culture

4.1. Documentation of “Bei” and Monetary Value

Xu Shen’s explanation: “Bei, the sea worm also... Like gua ancient goods shellfish and treasure turtle, Zhou and spring, to Qin waste shellfish line money “System biography”: “called the spring, want its trade popular not yong also, if the water yong is harmful” Zhouli notes that “its collection said spring, its line said cloth.”

Shellfish is a general term for mollusks with shells, but in ancient times it mainly referred to seashells. The shell characters on oracle bone inscriptions and gold inscriptions are just like the shape of seashells. In ancient China, seashells were a precious ornament. This is probably because it is too far from the sea, and it is not easy to get, so people are regarded as treasures, and they are strung up on their necks and hung on their chests to show that they are rich. This meaning can be analyzed from the word “baby”. Baby word from the two bays on the female, its original meaning is to wear on the woman’s neck skein shell neck decoration. So *Shuowen Jiezi* said: “Baby, neck decoration also [4].” Later, the shell became the earliest kind of coin, which was often seen in ancient tombs of the Shang and Zhou dynasties.

The word “Bei” in *Shuowen Jiezi* is defined as “soft currency, solid goods”, indicating its important monetary attributes. Historically, shells, as one of the first currencies, became an important tool of exchange and store of value. Documents show that shells were widely used in trade during the pre-Qin period, and many texts mention “white shell” and “black shell” as the main medium of exchange. By the Han Dynasty, shells were standardized as “dry” units, further clarifying the value of coins. In the *Book of Rites*, there is a saying: “pay attention to Bei”, indicating the importance of the shell as a pricing unit.

Archaeological discoveries have also confirmed the circulation characteristics of shell money. The amount of shell money unearthed is huge, covering from the Neolithic Age to the Shang and Zhou dynasties, a total of thousands. These shells vary in length, width, and weight, showing that shell money had different levels of value in ancient societies. The literature describes the trade of “thousand shells for one cow” with seashells, which reflects the formation of its relative value. In addition, in

the ancient market transactions, shells became the standard for merchants to evaluate and price, which promoted the development of economic activities.

Over time, shell money was gradually replaced by metal money, but in ancient literature, the monetary properties of shells are still emphasized. In the Tang Dynasty, the Great Yuan Unified Annals pointed out that although copper coins had been replaced, seashells were still used for small transactions in some areas. This phenomenon shows that the influence of shells as money goes deep into the people and maintains its value for a certain period of time.

The documentary knowledge of shells also includes rich forms of value assessment. In the book “Mozi”, it is described that different forms of shells correspond to different levels of value, “the nobility of the shell varies from time to time.” Shells were also frequently mentioned in Tang poetry as a metaphor for wealth and status. The guild rules of this period refer to shells as the basis for transactions, showing the close connection between shells and money.

On the whole, the shell currency represented by the word “Bei” played a crucial role in the exchange and transaction of ancient society. Through textual research on relevant texts, we can clearly see the multi-dimensional value of shells as money, reflecting the far-reaching influence of ancient social and economic conditions and cultural inheritance [5, 6].

4.2. Influence of the Character “Bei” on the Customs of Currency Transactions

“Bei” is an important symbol in ancient Chinese characters which is closely related to currency transactions. In ancient China, “Bei” not only refers to the shell of a Marine mollusk, but also represents a symbol of money, which has important economic and cultural value. As the physical form of money, “bei” originated from the trading customs of early society and gradually evolved into the form of standard money. Archaeological research shows that as early as the end of the Neolithic Age and the Shang and Zhou dynasties, “Bei” was widely used for exchange and trade. Among them, the use of shell groups such as conch, jade shell, etc., the number of hundreds to thousands, is regarded as a symbol of wealth and status.

The word “Bei” frequently appears in ancient texts, especially in *Zhouyi* and *Shangshu*, where there are detailed records of wealth and transactions measured by Bei. These records not only involve the process of goods trading, but also include the formation and circulation mechanism of social credit. For example, the reference in the Book of Rites to “valuing the shellfish” is a sign of the important position and generally accepted nature of shells in the trade.

With the passage of time, the symbolic significance of “Bei” continued to expand, until the Han Dynasty, Bei was not only used for small transactions, but also existed as a form of taxation and gift, representing the establishment of the national monetary system. Data analysis shows that the number of shells in circulation as currency in the Han Dynasty reached hundreds of millions, and its influence cannot be underestimated in the entire ancient social trading customs. This also led to later studies on the standardization of money, such as the use of “money” as a monetary unit, gradually replacing the shell, but its symbolic significance is still retained.

The existence of the word “Bei” emphasizes the importance of trade trust, and both sides of the transaction rely on Bei as a credit certificate, which promotes the prosperity and development of the society. At the spiritual and cultural level, “Bei” is not only a symbol of material, but also carries the fairness and integrity of exchange. Therefore, in the later cultural and artistic works, the common “Bei” character is combined with the transaction scene, which strengthens the social cognition and memory of “Bei”.

The ancient Chinese currency trading customs were deeply influenced by the word “Bei”, which formed the evolution process from barter to currency circulation, and affected the social structure, economic activities and cultural inheritance. From the analysis of archaeological data and literature, “Bei” as a currency is not only the embodiment of “price”, but also the reflection of social ecology,

indicating the complex understanding of value and trust in ancient people [7]. It provides abundant materials and perspectives for later generations to study the ancient monetary system, trading customs and their social significance.

4.3. How Does the Word “Bei” Reflect the Social and Economic Situation?

4.3.1. Table Sales Relationship

The ancient Chinese word for buying, from the net to the shell, means to take the shell with the net. Mao, defined in *Shuowen Jiezi* as “to buy.” It indicates early forms of trade, primarily the act of purchasing. With the development of society, trading markets became more mature, and there has been an industry specializing in trading activities to make profits. For instance, the term fan in *Shuowen Jiezi* refers to the practice of “buying cheaply and selling at a higher price,” reflecting the development of trade professions aimed at capitalizing on price differences.

4.3.2. Table Lending Relationship

The prosperity of economic life has paid attention to the efficiency of the use of funds, and the relationship between private creditor’s rights and debts has been increasing. Such as “Shuo wen” on credit: “On credit, always buy also.” From Bei, Yu Sheng.” Delay payment on purchases. Deferred collection of table sales. The word “credit”, such as credit purchase and sale, still means this. Loan “Shuo Wen”: “Goods, also. From the sound of Bedee.”

4.3.3. Table Pawn Mortgage Relationship

Pawning mainly refers to a way of borrowing and financing with money and property as pledge. This kind of barter for money financing method, as long as the customer in the specified time and pay a certain comprehensive service fee, can redeem the pawn.

Zhi Refers to *pawn* or *mortgage*, meaning to use property or people as collateral or guarantee. In *Shuowen Jiezi*, under the “bei” (money) section, it defines “zhi” as “exchanging one item for another as a pledge.” Meanwhile, *zhui* means *mortgage* or *pledge*. In *Shuowen Jiezi*, also under the bei section, it defines *zhui* as “using an item as security for money.” Duan Yucui’s annotation clarifies this as similar to modern-day mortgaging or collateral.

4.3.4. The Expression of Atonement for Redemption

In the context of *Shuowen Jiezi*, redemption means “to trade” or, in its primary sense, to use property to reclaim or exchange a person or collateral. For example, one might redeem life by purchasing a living creature’s freedom, akin to a ransom ticket. In this sense, redemption extends to using assets to exonerate or mitigate a fault. Examples include life redemption: using property to offset the penalty; Atonement: Using wealth to offset or atone for sins or offenses; Redemption Money/Silver: Financial means used to absolve one's sins or amend faults; Atoning Silk: Silk given as a form of restitution; Ransom: Paying to secure freedom from labor or other obligations.

4.3.5. Means to Pay Taxes

In *Shuowen Jiezi*, *fu* is defined as “collection” or “gathering” and is formed by the character components “bei” (representing money or wealth) and “wu” (representing force or military power). The character suggests the concept of gathering wealth through the use of force, signifying a tax or tribute collected from the populace. “Fu” typically refers to resources taken from the civilian population. Given that “wu” has implications of restraining violence, maintaining order, establishing

achievements, securing the populace, uniting people, and enhancing resources, state-level activities of significant importance are often carried out through enforced measures symbolized by force. Various types of taxes existed, such as military tax, poll tax, and notably river or waterway tax [8, 9].

5. Conclusion

The study of the character “bei” in *Shuowen Jiezi* reveals the rich connotation of ancient Chinese numismatic culture. Through the investigation of the evolution of the literal meaning of the word “bei” and its related words, it is found that the character “shellfish” not only represents marine shellfish, but also serves as a symbol of ancient currency, reflecting the economic activities and cultural exchanges at that time. This research combines the multidimensional perspectives of philology, archaeology, and ancient economic history to construct an interdisciplinary research framework.

The results of this study not only provide a basis for further discussion of ancient numismatic culture, but also provide an important reference for understanding the evolution of Chinese characters and the diversification of ancient Chinese economic forms, especially the phenomenon of economic and cultural integration shown in the character “bei”, which will play a positive role in promoting future literature research, archaeological excavation and systematic research on economic history.

In the study of the influence of the “bei” part of the character on the numismatic culture of ancient China, although certain results have been achieved, there are still some things that can be improved. For the literature research of the character “bei”, the existing research mainly focuses on the refinement of the meaning of the word and the interpretation of the cultural connotation and lacks a systematic analysis of the development of coins in specific historical periods. Future research can use the interdisciplinary methods of archaeology and history to systematically sort out the cultural relics related to “shell” unearthed in different dynasties and combine archaeological discoveries and ancient documents to deeply explore the evolution of the character “bei” and its relationship with the shape and function of coins, so as to enhance the empirical basis of research.

At the same time, it is necessary to conduct cross-country comparative studies to compare the character “bei” and its cultural connotations with the currency symbols of other cultural systems of the same period, so as to reveal the cultural exchange and influence. For example, by comparing the symbolic meanings of currency symbols in ancient China and neighboring countries such as Japan and Korea and exploring the cultural integration and differences within the region, it can promote the study of the “bei” character to a higher level and enrich the academic connotation of ancient monetary culture.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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