Manipulations of the 'Dog' in Chinese Words: simple mechanics or misocyny?

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Xu Shen with the *Shuowen Jiezi* (ca 100CE) initiated a mode of thinking for Chinese words in terms of etymons (radicals) that would become and remain authoritative even for the written system of today. Xu wrote his headers, such as the 'dog,' in seal script. By then, the 'dog' graph had already lost its pictographic resemblance to a dog; it had instead become structurally similar to 'human' graphs. Semantically, the 'dog' was also a component of Chinese characters with meliorative human qualities. With the standardized regular script-forms, that 'dog' component in characters pertaining to human-animal qualities was gradually erased. One can only speculate on the motivations for the manipulations of characters such as 'dog' through time. It could be a simple case of dropping a calligraphic stroke, but I am inclined to believe that it is more a case of a gradual misocyny that accrued from the Tang dynasty onward.

0. Introduction

This paper is part of a project entitled "The Dao of the dog: a post-humanist approach to Chinese culture," which investigates linguistic, textual and visual aspects of China's dog culture through time. The dog was a central and positive figure in early China, but it gradually became a trope for negative human conduct. In my research, I attempt to explore the reasons and the events that created this shift in attitude, ending in the demise of the dog.

In a recent paper "Shuo 'gou' jie 'quan:' when cynology informs sinology," delivered at the annual conference of the Association for Asian Studies, I discussed the two common Chinese terms for the word 'dog,' 'gou' and 'quan' by examining the first glosses from the *Shuowen Jiezi* and the *Erya* in the light of present-day canine knowledge. Even though I was able to show early China's extensive cynological knowledge that is only now being recognized by recent scientific findings in ethology and genetics, I still was unsatisfied by my explanation of the most baffling definition of 'quan' given by Xu Shen as "the lifted limb," 'xuan ti'. My reading of the 'xuan ti' as a reference to the dog's speed, or the hunting dog's pointing or the domestic dog's pawing was missing one vital link: a study of the 'quan' character's graph.

1. The 'quan' graph and the seal script break

Understanding the graph for 'dog,' 犬 [quan], as a continuous evolution since the initial pictograph requires a leap of faith. 犬 is a well-documented character, available in all scripts, from *jiaguwen* 甲骨文 to *jinwen* 金文 to seal script, *zhuanshu* 篆書, and so on. And yet the abrupt change from pictographic variants to the seemingly abstract seal

script is unknown and unexplained. Scholars maintain that 犬 is pictographic. To my knowledge Feng Kuanping is the only one to acknowledge the absolute loss of resemblance. The dog's pictograph shows a head, legs, and a tail; "later, for unknown reasons," Feng says, the head has become the top of the character, the body has become a half 'pie' 撇 [left curving stroke], and the tail, a 'na' 捺 [right falling stroke], it doesn't look like anything [like a dog], except perhaps when it is used as a side radical" (2007: 81).

Dog graph in jiaguwen, jinwen, seal scripts

Whereas the 'natural' evolution of a character with pictographic roots follows a mechanical abbreviation that results in a gradual disappearance of the pictorial quality, for example the word for 'human,' 大 initially a recognizable stick figure was downsized to its two legs 人 –more specifically, to one arm (left) and one leg (right), now two calligraphic strokes that only students of Chinese can read 'pictorially'. Even with he most vivid of imaginations, the seal script for 'dog' cannot be seen as a picture of a dog. The 'natural' evolution of the 'dog' graph, from pictographic representation to abstraction, is broken with the seal script-form.

This is problematic because Xu Shen, the author of the *Shuowen Jiezi*, chose to write his dictionary entries in small-seal script, the seal script of the Qin dynasty.[1] It seems he didn't have access to earlier scripts such as jinwen where the dog looks very much like a domestic dog. Xu relies on Confucius to claim that the 'dog' graph is pictographic: "Confucius said: To look at the graph 'quan' is like looking at a drawing of a dog." 象形。孔子曰：視犬之字如畫狗也.

It is possible to pinpoint which script Confucius was referring to: jinwen, bronze inscriptions. The pictographic quality of the dog graph does not come from earlier scripts commonly called jiaguwen. Jinwen spans through the Bronze age, from the Shang down to the Warring States. Confucius lived during the Spring & Autumn period, 770–476 BCE, more precisely from 551 to 479 BCE, a period where jinwen was used for official inscriptions. A person devoted to studying Classics was naturally an epigrapher.

[1] Following *jinwen*, the numerous scripts of the Zhou dynasty before the standardization during the Qin dynasty were retrospectively subsumed under the single name of 'large seal script,' *dazhuan* 大篆). *Dazhuan* is a Han dynasty term for scripts of the Zhou dynasty. See Yong & Peng, p. 99; Tsien, p. 119.

Furthermore, Confucius knew domestic dogs well since he owned a dog.[2] The *jiaguwen* dog figure admittedly looks like a quadruped, a canine maybe, but perhaps a pig, or a cow, too; it has a tail but that curled tail that's a trait of the dog in the *jinwen* script is not always present. Pigs and dogs can look the same in *jiaguwen*. *Jiaguwen* experts can only distinguish a species from another by integrating ethology and semantic context. That's the way a scholar like Dan Yuchen, for example, can distinguish the wolf from the fox, and from the dog on oracle bone inscriptions. The *jinwen* graph for the dog is significantly different from the *jiaguwen* graphs: it definitely looks like a dog, a medium-sized one. Its tail is curled upwards; its ears look floppy and its snout is obvious. In other words, the *jinwen* pictograph is an illustration of the ubiquitous domestic dog: a short snout, large eyes, floppy ears and a curved tail. Those traits are paedomorphic features of the generic domestic dog, which separate it from its wilder canine cousins (Wang: 158).

This gloss is clear, but it is the second one in the 犬 entry of the dictionary. Here is the first gloss: 犬：狗之有縣蹠者也. The dog has lifted limb(s) [xuanti]. The "lifted limb" appears to be a semantic definition, perhaps motivated by phonetic considerations /xuan/ for /quan/. If the lifted limb can be explained as referring to a specific dog such as the Saint-Bernard (with its lifted fifth digit) or a hunting dog (pointing to the prey), where is the graphemic analysis? Bottéro and Harbsmeier have described the composition of the lexical entries of the *Shuowen Jiezi* as first always giving the semantic gloss *in reference to the graph analysis*, which is then analyzed into semantic and phonetic constituents (2008, 252). I find that "the lifted limb" needs to be analyzed as a graph, too.

Human graphs: 夭'yao'、大'da'、天 'tian' 尢'wang' in seal script

The seal script-form of the 'quan' graph has two fascinating traits, the first, as mentioned earlier, is that it breaks the pictorial resemblance with a dog; the second, is that it eerily looks like some 'human' graphs in seal script: the character 大 'da,' "big" which is a person with arms stretched out; 夭 'yao,' "young" which is a person with a head bent; 天 'tian,' "heaven" which is a person with a big head and especially 尢 'wang,' a "lame person" who puts his/her weight on his/her right leg to move forward. This last character is identical to the 'quan' "dog" character, except that the latter has the additional calligraphic stroke, the 'dian'点.

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[2] Confucius' dog is mentioned in the *Liji,* Tan Gong II 檀弓下:仲尼之畜狗死 [When Confucius' domestic dog died from the Warring States (475 BC - 221 BC), *Chinese Text Project.*

If one looks closely at both characters' right-falling stroke, it is not a calligraphic 'na' 捺 stroke, but an inverted S shape. That form is a bent limb, which can certainly be called a "lifted limb." The *Shuowen Jiezi*'s first gloss can also therefore be understood as a commentary on the graph itself, in seal script. The 'quan-dog' graph would no longer be a pictograph of a dog, but rather a pictograph of a human holding a stick and moving forward on one leg to beat the dog. This meaning would refer to be the dog as meat. This is still the way dogs are killed for their meat in southern China. On the other hand, it could of course be a coincidence, seal script being often a formal re-creation of the initial pictograph.

Dog 犬 and lame person 尢 in seal script

2. Co-evolution of the dog and human graphs

With the advent of *lishu*, clerical script, during the Qin dynasty, the repertory of strokes for characters was delimited. The inverted S-shape alluding to a bent or lifted limb, disappeared. As a consequence, that proto-stroke was gradually merged with the right-falling stroke codified as a 'na' 捺. The accentuated 'na' stroke, which is perhaps the most identifiable trait of *lishu*, is in fact a compression of several curves. The dog graph, in *lishu*, becomes identical to the 'da' graph. Curiously, the lame person graph, 'wang' retains its differentiating limb by pulling that limb stroke away from the center of the graph. It was good that Xu Shen wrote his headers in seal script, and his explanations in *lishu*, the prevalent script of his day.

With *kaishu*, the standardized form of the Tang-Song periods, the dog and the human graphs are stroke for stroke identical, except for that last 'dian' 点 "dot" stroke that the dog has, which I will from now on call the "canine marker." Remove it and the caninity is fully erased.

Dog 犬, Human 大, Lame person 尢 in clerical script

The first case of the erasure of the canine marker dates from the Tang dynasty. It is a willful act of retrofitting. The character for "happy, laughing," 'xiao,'which is composed in seal script, as recorded in the *Shuowen jiezi*, as 'bamboo' and 'quan-dog' is thereafter written as 笑, 'bamboo' and 'young person with bent head' 夭 by Li Yangbing 李陽冰 of the Kaiyuan era, 713-741. While the two initial components referred

to a happy state where one is in a bamboo grove with one's dog, the new juxtaposition replaces the dog with a human. Li explained the newly fashioned graph for laughter/smiling as: "竹得風，其體夭屈如人之笑: bamboo in the wind bend and sway like a person laughing." Li was a noted calligrapher, especially of the seal script; he set upon revising the *Shuowen Jiezi*. Although Li's self-styled 'definitive version of the *Shuowen Jiezi*' was editorially revised under the Song dynasty, that is the *Shuowen Jiezi* was returned to its initial content, the character 笑 in Li's fashioning nevertheless became the accepted graph over time. While the canine component is present in the rhyme dictionary *Guang Yun,* it disappeared for good from the *Kangxi zidian* onward. The respected *Handian* uses Li's seal script, transcribed by Chen Changzhi in the Qing dynasty. The only person who alluded to this missing dog component was the Ming Emperor Xuanzong 明宣宗 with his painting, "Yi 'xiao' tu"《一笑图》that depicts a dog in a bamboo grove. But that was just for a laugh.

Character 笑 with the dog 犬 and with the human with bent head 夭

During the Northern Song, rhyme dictionaries such as the *Guangyun* (1008) and the *Jiyun* (1037) additionally gave brief explanations of Chinese characters and revised some of them. The word for 'award/ to praise/ to exhort' 'jiang' 獎 initially composed of the dog 犬 and the 'what will happen in the future/ to offer [dog]meat" 將 was changed to 'gong' 廾, two human hands held up: 弌 --to offer 'something'. Again, I believe that the initial character in seal script referred to the offering of dog meat as a reward. It was similar to 獻, to offer dog meat, the favored meat for sacrifices. The *Jiyun* does not even mention the initial 'quan-dog' 犬: it gives the component as 'da' 大, human. In the definitive *Kangxi Zidian*, 'jiang' is classified back with the dog component, but the variants with 廾 and with 大 are also listed. In the 1950s, the Xinhua dictionary finally got rid of the dot, both in traditional and simplified versions.

3. Simple mechanics

The disappearance of the canine marker on the character 獎 easily goes unnoticed because the character has so many strokes, especially where the bottom of the right side of 將 meets the top and the canine marker of 犬. I contend that words with the component/radical 犬 have been, throughout history, 'relieved' of that canine marker in everyday writing and calligraphy.

It is possible to show how the graphs 犬、大、夭, already very similar, actually structurally identical at their core, have been substituted one for the other, or rather subsumed under the simplest, 大, and not only when they are cursive. Examples date back to the Han dynasty, from a stele called Yijing bei 乙瑛碑 carved in 153CE (a). The canine marker has been merged with the horizontal line, the calligraphic '*heng*' 横. Another example (c) dates from the Jin dynasty and is a rubbing of the Chengqingtang 澄清堂帖 by the sage of calligraphy, 王羲之 of the 4th century. This cursive rendering accentuates so much the 'dian' 点 that it turns it into a 'pie' 撇. Compare these two 犬 calligraphies with other contemporary renderings of the 大 characters: another Han dynasty stele, the Cao Quan stele 汉曹全碑 (b), where 大 happens to have a very thick right extension. The two cursive 'da' examples (d; e) link the horizontal stroke with the '*pie'*, as if signifying a dot, much like the 犬 case. These last two examples are from father and son, first Wang Xizhi's son, Wang Xianzhi, from his Zhongqiutie 中秋帖 and then by Wang Xizhi himself, from his Chunhua Getie 淳化阁帖.

The materials here matter: it's hard to carve a dot in stone (case A); it's easy to link strokes with a brush on silk or paper and make the dot disappear, become part of the momentum of the composition. Nevertheless, it is evident that that dot is not visible in either case. All the examples can be read as human, 大.

a)犬: Yiyingbei; b) 大: Caoquanbei; c) 犬 : Chengqingtang; d) 大: Zhongqiutie; e)大: Chunhuagetie

So, is the disappearance of the canine marker a casual dropping or merging of the *'dian'* 点 or a willful erasure to rid characters of their canine origins? My contention is that is it the latter. Recently, several articles in Chinese have reopened the case of the word 'to cry, lament' 'ku,' 哭 which still has a conspicuous canine marker. Hu Hong's text is typical of the effort to explain away the canine in such a human emotion: the graph is erroneous, something along the evolution of script-forms, muddled the human and the dog; the etymology of 'ku' has to be corrupt, the 犬 is a 大 ; and so on. As I've shown in this presentation, to rid a graph of a dot is a simple affair, even when the character, such as 'ku' 哭 has less strokes than 'jiang' 奬. Perhaps the character 'ku' 哭 "crying" will soon be divested of its dot.

It would be sad, because such an erasure would concomitantly erase the human-animal bond that was deep in early China, so deep that it was embodied in Chinese characters. In those days, not only humans cried.

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