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Tracing Gender in Chinese Script: A Diachronic Semiotic Analysis from Oracle Bone Inscriptions to Modern Characters

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Abstract:

Writing systems can be understood as windows into both language and the cultural worlds they encode. Chinese script, in particular, has long attracted scholarly attention for its distinctive logographic structure and deep historical continuity. By treating the script as an ideological carrier rather than a neutral vehicle of language, this paper investigates how gendered concepts are encoded, structured, and transmitted through Chinese character formation, word formation, and semantic compounding. The paper analyzes how notions of femininity and masculinity were visually and conceptually constructed in the earliest stages of the Chinese writing system through a close examination of selected characters and semantic patterns. The study endeavors to demonstrate that gender in Chinese characters is not merely lexical but semiotically embedded, illuminating how the writing system functions as a bearer of cultural and ideological practices. The findings contribute to interdisciplinary discussions in semiotics, linguistics, and gender studies by highlighting the script's role in shaping and sustaining conceptualizations of gender from antiquity to the present.

Key words: *Gender, characters, semantics, script, ideology*

1. Introduction

"[T]here is very little doubt about the believe that the most characteristic feature of the Chinese language lies in its written characters." (Wu 1969: 423)

Language is a distinct social phenomenon that cannot exist independently of society; it reflects human social activities, modes of thought, and systems of values. Writing, as an extension of language, similarly embodies the cultural and ideological foundations of a society. A script may therefore be understood as a system of visual symbols employed to represent language in written form, enabling the preservation and transmission of speech, communication, and cultural knowledge across generations.

Chinese characters are the written symbols used in the Chinese writing system. They are commonly referred to as *Hanzi* (汉字), meaning "Han characters." Unlike alphabetic scripts that primarily represent sounds, Chinese characters are generally considered a logographic writing system, in which each character typically represents a morpheme or meaningful unit of language (DeFrancis 1986). Over several millennia, Chinese characters have evolved not merely as tools of communication but also as repositories of cultural memory, philosophical thought, and social values. According to Bob Hodge & Kam Louie: "The Chinese system of writing often seems like a dragon guarding the gates that lead into the Chinese mind and the texts that communicate it, dividing the world into two categories: those who can read characters, and can read what they want to and understand it in its original Chinese form, and those who can't, who are forever outsiders, dependent on translators to select and give the sense of the meanings that they need" (2005: 47).

Within Chinese mythological tradition, the cultural hero Fuxi (伏羲: *Fúxī*) is credited with the invention of writing, divination, and hunting tools through the principle of mimesis (Birrell 2010). According to legend, Fuxi created the earliest symbolic forms of the Eight Trigrams (八卦: *bāguà*) by observing the patterns and natural phenomena manifested in birds, animals, the heavens, and the earth. This narrative reflects the traditional Chinese understanding that writing emerged from humanity's attempt to interpret and represent the natural world. The earliest identifiable forms of written Chinese, however, date from approximately the 14th to 11th centuries BCE. These inscriptions carved on ox scapulae and turtle shells are commonly known as 'oracle bones' (甲骨: *jiǎgú*). These oracle bones inscriptions are the archaeological evidence of Shang Dynasty (商朝, 1600-1046 BC) and were discovered at Anyang (安阳: *Ānyáng*) in Henan province (河南省: *Hénán shěng*). According to the legend, more than 4,500 years ago, during the reign of China's founder, the Yellow Emperor (皇帝: *Huángdì*), the Chinese characters were created by the historian called Cang Jie (仓颉: *Cāngjié*) (Xue 2013).

Throughout the historical development of Chinese society, women have long been subordinated and constrained within a patriarchal social order, occupying comparatively lower social positions than men. As a result, gender discrimination has been deeply embedded not only in social institutions and cultural practices but also in the Chinese language itself. These inequalities are particularly evident in Chinese characters containing the 'female' radical (女: *nǚ*), many of which reflect traditional assumptions and attitudes toward women.

This raises an important question: do characters marked by the female radical genuinely embody gender discrimination, and if so, in what ways is such discrimination linguistically and culturally manifested? Addressing these questions requires the development of a comprehensive and systematic understanding of the meanings, functions, and historical evolution of characters associated with the female radical. Such an inquiry not only reveals the relationship between language and social ideology but also provides insight into the cultural perceptions of women embedded within the Chinese writing system.

This study seeks to examine the manifestations of sexism within the Chinese language by analyzing Chinese characters, word formation, and semantic structures, while further exploring the sociocultural factors underlying these phenomena from a sociological perspective. Both simplified and traditional Chinese characters, accompanied by their English translations, are employed throughout the discussion in order to facilitate a clearer understanding of the texts and the traditional cultural concepts they embody.

For the purposes of this study, the character 男 (*nán*) is used to denote 'male', while 女 (*nǚ*) denotes 'female'. In addition, the official Romanization system, *Hanyu Pinyin*, is provided alongside Chinese characters to ensure clarity and accessibility for readers unfamiliar with the Chinese script.

2. Diachronic evolution of characters

The origins of the modern Chinese writing system are both complex and intellectually compelling, requiring careful historical and cultural examination. A purely semantic interpretation of contemporary Chinese characters is insufficient to fully uncover the ways in which gender concepts are embedded within the script. In particular, the relationship between language and gender cannot be adequately understood without considering the historical evolution of Chinese orthography. An examination of the historical forms and development of Chinese characters containing the female marker or radical (女: *nǚ*) can significantly reduce the difficulties involved in interpreting the gendered meanings embedded within the writing system. By tracing the orthographic transformation of these characters from their earliest inscriptions to their modern forms, it becomes possible to identify how cultural perceptions of women and gender relations were encoded, preserved, and transmitted through the Chinese script across different historical periods.

The Oracle-Bone Script (甲骨文: *Jiǎgǔwén*), dating to the Shang dynasty (商朝: *Shāngcháo*, c. 1300 BCE), was inscribed on tortoise shells and animal bones and is widely regarded as the earliest known form of Chinese writing. Owing to its pictographic characteristics, many of its characters closely resemble drawings or visual representations of objects. Since these inscriptions were primarily used for divinatory practices, they are also referred to as 'Oracle inscriptions' (卜辞: *bǔcí*) or 'Carved Script' (契文: *qìwén*). There are about 4000 oracle-bone inscriptions collected, out of which more than 1000 could be deciphered (Li 2006). Although this writing system demonstrates a relatively advanced and coherent stage of development, many of its strokes and radicals had not yet become fully standardized. Variations in textual arrangement, character positioning, size, and structural complexity indicate that the orthographic conventions of the script were still in the process of formation and stabilization.

Source: Li Leyi (2006: 242)

Carol C. Fan (1996) observes that the character 女 (*nǚ*, "woman") originated as a pictographic representation of a person kneeling with folded hands, a posture traditionally interpreted as signifying submission or obedience. This pictographic form has often been understood as reflecting the subordinate social position assigned to women during the Shang dynasty period. The visual structure of the character therefore provides insight into the gender ideology embedded within early Chinese society and its writing system. It is frequently argued that with the decline of matriarchal social organization, patriarchal structures gradually emerged and became dominant in Chinese civilization. In this regard, Karsono (2013) notes that early Chinese society is believed to have initially possessed certain matriarchal characteristics in which women occupied relatively respected positions. Over time, however, this social structure evolved into a patriarchal system in which male authority became institutionalized and women's status progressively diminished.

After the Oracle Bone Script of Shang dynasty, Bronze Script (金文: *jīnwén*) came into being. This script is carved on bronze bells and vessels during the Shang and Zhou dynasties (about 1115-403 B.C.) and hence called 'bell-cauldron script' (钟鼎文: *zhōngdǐngwén*). The early characters of this type of writing

are similar to oracle-bone inscriptions and some still retain traces of early pictorial characters. Following the Bronze Script, Small Seal Script (小篆: *xiǎozhuàn*) came into existence. This was the common script of Qin Dynasty (秦朝: *qíncháo*) (221-207 B.C.) used after Qin Shihuang (known as first emperor of China) unified China and standardized the characters. The Clerical Script (隶书: *lìshū*) developed after Small Seal Script and was commonly used in Han Dynasty (汉朝: *hàncháo*) (206 B.C.- A.D. 220). After unification of China, since a lot of documents had to be written or copied as part of administrative works, the Clerical Script, was developed to save time. The emergence of Clerical Script laid the foundation for the later development of Regular Script (楷书: *kǎishū*), and at the same time became an important turning point in the history of the development of Chinese characters, i.e., from the stage of ancient writing to the stage of modern writing. The Regular Script began to appear in the last years of the Han Dynasty and in the early period of Jin Dynasty (晋朝: *jìncháo*) (265-420), which has been in use till date. The invention of printing heralded as a major breakthrough in the widespread and acceptance of this standard form of writing. The Cursive Script (草书: *cǎoshū*) appeared earlier than Regular Script, approximately in the early Han Dynasty (Li Leyi 2006). The early Cursive Script was a quick variant of the Regular Script and it was initially called 'Cao Li' (草隶: *cǎo lì*). Later it was also known as 'Zhang Cao' (章草: *zhāng cǎo*). After the end of the Han Dynasty, the traces of the Regular Script preserved in Zhang Cao were removed, forming the present Cursive style. The Running Script (行书: *xíngshū*) is a style between Regular Script and Cursive Script, which became popular since the Three Kingdoms and the Jin Dynasty (晋朝: *jìncháo*). This style was simple to write than Regular Script and easier to read than Cursive Script, hence it became popular among masses. The following table illustrates the diachronic development of a Chinese character from oracle bone inscription till the modern Chinese writing system.

Printed Style	Oracle-Bone script	Bronze Script	Small Seal Script	Clerical Script	Regular Script	Cursive Script	Running Script
Slave							

Table: 1

During the late stages of clan-based society, tribal warfare contributed to the emergence of a slave class, intensifying processes of plunder and facilitating the development of private property relations. As social stratification became more pronounced within clans, an exploiting class and an exploited class gradually took shape. Within this context, individuals belonging to the exploited groups were, in many cases, forced

by debt or economic hardship to use their daughters as collateral, effectively selling them to the dominant classes and thereby giving rise to an additional form of female slavery. Alongside women captured during warfare, these indebted women constituted the two primary sources of female slaves in early society. From an etymological perspective, the Chinese character '奴' (*nú*, 'slave') is composed of '女' (*nǚ*, 'woman') and '又' (hand), and in oracle bone inscriptions it is often interpreted as depicting a hand grasping a female figure, symbolizing subjugation and control. Similarly, the character "妇" (*fù*, traditional form 婦, 'married woman') is explained in *Shuowen Jiezi* as "service: one who holds a broom and sweeps" (婦, 服也。从女持帚,灑掃也: *fù, fú yě. cóng nǚ chí zhǒu, sǎsǎo yě*) (Xu 2004: 361), thereby associating women with domestic labor and household service within early lexical interpretation. In addition, numerous other characters historically attributed characteristics to women from a predominantly male-centered perspective, encompassing domains such as beauty, social status, occupation, and colloquial usage. In contrast, the character 'male' (男: *nán*) is defined by Xu Shen as "husband, who uses force to plough the field" (丈夫也。言男用力於田也: *zhàngfū yě. yán nán yònglì yú tián yě*) (Xu 2004: 408). Structurally, 男 is composed of "田" (*tián*, "field") and "力" (*lì*, "strength"), symbolically linking masculinity with agricultural labor and physical force. Within traditional sociocultural conventions, men were associated with work outside the household, particularly agricultural production, reinforcing the notion of male physical strength and productive capacity. Taken together, these lexical and structural patterns suggest that gendered meanings were embedded in the formation of Chinese characters, with differing social roles and attributes being ascribed to men and women through both semantic interpretation and graphic composition.

From the foregoing analysis, it may be inferred that Chinese characters did not arise merely from individual imagination, but rather function as a reflection of the society and prevailing ideological systems in which they were produced. In this sense, the writing system can be understood as a cultural mirror that encodes and preserves the social values, power relations, and belief structures of its historical context.

3. Gender in formation & classification of characters

During the Han dynasty, early efforts to systematize the structure and formation of Chinese characters were undertaken in the highly influential etymological dictionary *Shuowen Jiezi* (《说文解字》: *An Analysis and Explanation of Characters*), compiled by the scholar Xu Shen (许慎: *xǔshèn*). The title of the work may be translated as 'discussing writing and explaining characters', reflecting its dual emphasis on script analysis and semantic interpretation. In this text, Chinese characters are classified into six principal categories, collectively known as *Liu Shu* (六书: *liùshū*). This classificatory framework, grounded in

principles of character formation and functional usage, has since become a foundational reference in the study of Chinese orthography. The six categories are outlined and discussed as follows:

The first one is the Pictographic characters (象形字: *xiàngxíngzì*) which describes the shape of things and outline the objective things with simple strokes. Plants and animals, human bodies, natural phenomena and other concrete things are often recorded by pictographic method. Pictographic characters are the basis of Chinese characters, but this method of making characters is very limited. For example, the character "母" (*mǔ*) which indicates 'mother'. This character shows a kneeling female figure with folded hands and the two dots in the middle of the character representing breast to indicate that women are associated with childbirth and nurturing.

The second type is the Self-explanatory or indicative characters (指事字: *zhǐshìzì*). It is an abstract method of making characters, that is, when a concrete image is not available or inconvenient to draw, it is represented by an abstract symbol. In other words, it refers to the usage of symbolic signs, or the addition of indicative signs to pictographic characters to express the meaning of a word.[1] "叉" (*chā*) where the addition of a dot inside hand "又" (*yòu*) shows the movement of cross hand "叉", would be a typical example.

The third type is the Associate Compounds (会意字: *huìyìzì*) where two or more than two characters are used together to form a new character, so that people can understand its meaning from the shape of the character. Associative compounds deploy flexible and diverse methods to combine pictographic and self-explanatory characters. It can create more characters than the rest two. "妥" (*tuǒ*) is a distinctive example that indicates clawing a girl. The upper part is claw "爪" (*zhuǎ*) invoking that its appropriate to claw a woman.

The next is Pictophonetic characters (形声字: *xíngshēngzì*). Like the name suggests, pictophony or ideophones is a method of creating new characters by combining pictograms and phonetic symbols. The common combination of pictophonetic characters is further divided into six categories, (a) Pictograms on left, phonetics on right, for example the character "嫖" (*piáo*). The left pictogram indicates 'woman' (女: *nǚ*) and the right '票' (*piào*) indicates money. Together it connotes to visit brothel where one can have fun with women by paying money. (b) Phonetics on left, pictograms on right, for example, "放" (*fàng*): the left side is the phonetic part "方" (*fāng*) which means a place and the right pictogram is "攵" (*pū*). Together it

[1] Pictographic and self-explanatory characters are generally monosyllabic.

means 'to set free' (放). (c) Pictograms on top, phonetics at bottom[2], the example would be "雾" (*wù*). the upper pictograph is rain "雨" (*yǔ*), and the lower phonetic component is must "务" (*wù*), together which gives the explanation of 'fog' (雾) which is water floating above the ground after being condensed. (d) Phonetics on top, pictograms at bottom, the example of the character "婆" (*pó*) that means 'mother-in-law' is comprised of "波" (*bō*) at its top which means unexpected turn of events. In correlation to 'woman' (女: *nǚ*) it means a woman, who's action could not be predicted. (e) Pictograms inside & phonetics outside, the example would be '㜷' (*niǎo*). The inner pictogram is woman "女" (*nǚ*), whereas the outer phonetic part is male '男' (*nán*). The two males are put in this specific way gives the meaning of 'to tease' or 'to flirt with' (㜷). (f) Phonetics inside, pictograms outside,[3] an example would be '园' (*yuán*): this character which means 'garden' is constituted by the pictogram of enclosure '口' (*wéi*) and phonetic '元' (*yuán*) which means to grow vegetables or plants. Putting the phonetic meaning inside the pictogram renders the sense of an enclosure to grow vegetables or plants, in other words 'garden' (园).

The Explanative or synonymous characters (转注字: *zhuǎnzhùzì*) comes after Pictophonetic characters. These characters refer to a pair with same radical. Since the characters have the same or similar sounds, they have the same meaning and can explain each other. In other words, when a pictophonetic character could not express the meaning clearly, to differentiate or to clarify the meaning of the whole character, another pictographic component is added. For example, "顶" (*dǐng*) & "巅" (*diān*), both the characters have the same '页' (*yè*) radical. The pronunciations are similar and the meanings are too connected, i.e., top (顶) and peak (巅).

The in the six categories comes the Phonetic loan characters (假借字: *jiǎjièzì*). This category of characters complements the rest five methods by borrowing existing characters to indicate things or concepts for which no character had been created. These characters originally with different meaning have been borrowed to represent another concept retaining the same pronunciation. For example, "自" (*zì*): originally referred to nose, which is later used to indicate oneself.

[2] The examples with 'woman' (女) are literally difficult to find since 'woman' (the pictogram) is perceived not above anything. The position of a woman is always a subordinate or below something.

[3] Like 'pictograms on top, phonetics at bottom', the examples of 'phonetics inside, pictogram outside' with 'woman' (as the pictogram), seem to be impossible in two ways. First is as per the Chinese tradition, women are not supposed to step out of their boudoirs but to stay indoors. Second, judging from the structure of the character "女", it is impractical to add any other component inside it.

It may be concluded from the formation and categorization of Chinese characters that women were historically represented in a subordinate position and, in certain contexts, negatively evaluated. These social attitudes are reflected in the ways characters were created and semantically structured, thereby revealing the ideological perspectives embedded in the writing system and produced through collective cultural practices.

4. The syntactic asymmetries

Chinese and English belong to Sino-Tibetan and Indo-European language family respectively. Both the languages reflect discrimination against women in varying degrees. One is ideographic and the another is phonetic script, hence gender discrimination manifests in different manners. The discrimination against women in English word structures is mainly reflected in the fact that most of the female words are composed of male words with attached affixes. These affixes often contain the sense of 'tiny' or 'insignificant'. Like '-ette' and '-ess' in goddess, usherette, actress, waitress etc. It could be inferred that masculine words are unmarked and generic, whereas feminine words are marked, subsidiary and derivation of masculine words. Chinese too, like English, delineates gender by certain feminine marker. One of such markers is the 'female radical'[4](女: *nǚ*). As claimed by Cherng, Chang & Chen (2009), Chinese culture has a pervasive male chauvinism in it and that could be corroborated by the fact that Chinese script projects negative attitude towards women. Gender discrimination in Chinese script is basically focused at characters with female radical. One can identify the image of female in Chinese script by analyzing the female radical. For example, the occupation 'doctor' (医生: *yīshēng*) could be perceived as gender neutral, however, to distinguish between male and female doctors, the 'female radical' (女: *nǚ*) is prefixed before 'doctor' marking it as 'female doctor' (女医生: *nǚ yīshēng*). Another typical term would be 'prostitute'. This word is traditionally alleged to be associated with women and hence its equivalence in Chinese is "妓" (*jì*), carrying 'female radical' (女: *nǚ*) in it. However, nowadays the term 'male prostitute' or 'gigolo' has surpassed the traditional mentality of women being the sole bearer of this occupation. But to differentiate the sexes in the occupation, 'male' is attached to 'prostitute'. In Chinese it is called "妓男" (*jìnán*). Even though males have also taken up this profession but in Chinese writing style, female radical "女" is still used without creating a new character for 'male prostitute' leaving the imprint of traditional concept of women undertaking this profession.

[4] The characters are basically composed of two components or morphemes, i.e., the radical part or 'the signific' (Ettner 2001: 32) or 'semantic stem' (Fan 1996), which usually provides the semantic significance, and the phonetic part which indicates the pronunciation of the character.

It is interesting to note that males who are perceived to be epicene or effeminate are marked by "㚘" (*jī*) in Chinese (Sun 1997: 22). The upper part of the character has been derived from "男" (male) and the lower segment is "女" (female), dropping us the hint that even though it is a criticism towards certain kind of men but males are always above female.

The gender bias could also be found in the characters of appellations. In many cases, the female radical '女' is found in female names to separate it from male names. The mythical story of Nu Wa (女娲: *nǚwā*) also suggests the usage of the female radical in the goddess's name who is considered to be the creator of human beings and also the savior of earth from a great flood. The following table will underline how female names are differentiated than male names by adding the female radical.

Female surname	***Pinyin***	**Male surname**	***Pinyin***
妮	*nī*	尼	*ní*
茜	*xī*	希	*xī*
娃	*wá*	瓦	*wǎ*
娅	*yà*	亚	*yà*
娜	*nà*	纳	*nà*
薇	*wēi*	维	*wéi*

Table: 2

Chinese is a non-morphological language (Jiang 2005). The word form lacks change, but it is very strict in word form and cannot be changed at will. Within many compound expressions involving both men and women, the male term consistently precedes the female term. Examples include male and female (男女: *nánnǚ*), couple (husband wife) (夫妻: *fūqī*), husband & wife (夫妇: *fūfù*), father & mother (父母: *fùmǔ*), husband's parents (公婆: *gōngpó*), brother and his wife (兄嫂: *xiōngsǎo*), younger brother's wife (弟妹: *dìmèi*), children (son & daughter) (子女: *zǐnǚ*), grandfather & grandmother (爷爷奶奶: *yéye nǎinai*), uncle & aunty (叔叔阿姨: *shūshu āyí*), brothers and sisters (兄弟姐妹: *xiōngdìjiěmèi*) etc. The ordering of these lexical pairs is not merely grammatical or stylistic; rather, it reflects deeply embedded social and cultural values. In traditional Chinese culture, concepts of hierarchy, superiority, and social prestige strongly influence linguistic structure. Terms associated with higher status, honor, or authority are typically positioned before those perceived as subordinate or inferior. Consequently, the recurrent sequencing of male before female may be interpreted as a linguistic manifestation of patriarchal ideology and male

superiority. Through such seemingly ordinary patterns of word formation, language subtly reproduces and reinforces gender hierarchy within society.

5. Conclusion

Language and social structures are profoundly interconnected. Gender discrimination exists within society, and language both reflects and perpetuates this social reality. As a cultural medium and social construct, language is itself a form of social reality through which ideologies, values, and power relations are expressed and sustained. Consequently, gender discrimination embedded within the Chinese language remains an important subject of scholarly inquiry. In traditional Chinese society, women were historically marginalized and often relegated to subordinate positions across social, political, economic, and cultural spheres. Men occupied dominant roles in nearly every aspect of public and private life, while women were frequently denied opportunities for agency, expression, and participation.

Within this sociocultural context, Chinese characters containing the 'female radical' (女: *nǚ*) provide valuable insight into historical perceptions of women. Although such characters constitute only a relatively small proportion of the overall Chinese writing system and do not all inherently possess negative meanings, many nevertheless reveal implicit gender bias rooted in traditional Chinese culture. Whether their meanings are overtly negative, seemingly neutral, or even superficially positive, these characters often encode stereotypical assumptions concerning women, femininity, morality, and social roles. From the earliest stages of character formation to modern written usage, these linguistic traces have persisted and continue to mirror broader societal attitudes toward gender.

An examination of characters incorporating the female radical therefore enables a deeper understanding of the cultural representations of women embedded within the Chinese linguistic tradition. At the same time, such analysis demonstrates the historical depth, cultural complexity, and enduring expressive power of the Chinese writing system, revealing how language functions not merely as a tool of communication but also as a repository of social ideology and cultural memory.

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