

Development of Pronouns in Classical Chinese

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Introduction

The first person pronoun in modern Chinese, 我 *wǒ*, has been in use since the earliest known samples of Chinese writing over 3,300 years ago.

The rest of the story is much more complex.

Until the foundation of the Qin empire, several dozens of characters had been used to write a large number of different pronouns. Many of these have only a small number of recorded uses and the details of their usage are uncertain. Others, like 我, survived in literary Chinese and even made its way into today's vernacular.

The next section contains a brief summary of the written Chinese language and its development until the imperial unification, followed by a few remarks about pronunciation relevant to the next two sections, which discuss first person and second person pronouns in detail. Finally I try to summarize the development of these pronouns in pre-imperial times, and the relations between them.

Development of Classical Chinese

The earliest *known* examples of Chinese writing are found on the oracle bones, dating back to the fourteenth century BCE during the Shang dynasty. [2] When the Zhou dynasty replaced the Shang some 3,000 years ago, oracle bones became rare, but bronze inscriptions became more common and verbose.

In spite of being hard to interpret and somewhat lacking in variation, oracle bones and bronze inscriptions have the advantage of being fixed. Later texts are longer, more diverse and generally more useful, *but*, their authenticity and integrity can often be questioned. This obviously makes a linguistic analysis more difficult and error-prone.

Several more centuries of development follow, until we arrive at the classics of the Warring States period.¹ These texts served as a model for the literary language during more than two thousand years of imperial China, until this ancient form of the written language was finally abandoned in the early 20th century.

In fact, from very early times, authors were looking at older texts (or copying them verbatim), often without a thorough understanding of the finer points of grammar. Karlgren describes the ensuing complexity: “The Chinese literary language is exceedingly syncretic. All grammatical expedients which have been current at any time in the past, can be used promiscuously [sic] in the literature of later epochs.” [4]

¹Burton Watson’s *Early Chinese Literature* (Columbia University Press, 1962) is a very pleasant introduction to important Chinese texts prior to about 100 CE.

Sound and Symbol

Since Chinese writing is non-alphabetical, it is impossible to know for sure how a certain character was pronounced during the pre-imperial period. At best one can make an educated guess, based on the phonetic element (if there is one) and rhymes in poems of the time (if there are any). Thus, results based on this reconstructed phonetic information should be taken with a grain of salt.

Since pronouns tend to use loan characters,² however, we can not simply disregard phonetics when analyzing them. The appendix contains several different reconstructions of relevant words, for easy reference. Note how different the three reconstructions of early Zhou Chinese are, and you should get a feeling for how much uncertainty is involved. However, while the details certainly differ, many of the patterns discussed later remain no matter which reconstruction we choose to follow.

First Person

Early Pronouns

余 *yú* and 予 *yǔ* were used during Shang and Zhou to write what is usually considered to be the same word, a first person pronoun used as subject and object. [1, 3] However, Pulleyblank notes that in the 楚辭 *Chǔcí* a distinction is made between them, where 予 occurs more frequently in object position.

²Characters which initially represented a homophone to a word which lacks a graph of its own – or where the author has forgot how to write that graph.

[10] Schuessler (see the appendix) gives slightly different Old Chinese³ pronunciations for 余 and 予.

Example 1. 余佳即朕小學

“I then was attending my first school”

Bronze vessel, ca. 981 BCE.⁴

King 康 Kang of Zhou (ca. 1004-967 BCE) addressing general 孟 Yu. (See [1] p. 130, 221. Says 991 B.C., apparently a misprint)

Example 2. 予惟小子

“I am but a little child”

Announcement of king 成 Cheng of Zhou (ca. 1024-1005 BCE).

書經 Shūjīng, 大誥 (Great Announcement, [1] p. 127, 148.)

In both these examples, the monarch is speaking about his own person, which is also the usage found in the Shang oracle bones. [10] In example 1, we also see another first person pronoun, 朕 *zhèn*, used. This is possessive in the Shang and early Zhou inscriptions, but in the Shujing it also sometimes non-possessive. [3, 10]

Example 3. 朕言艱日思

“I spoke of the troubles and of my daily cares”

The king speaking about his duty to fulfill the mission of his forefathers. Shujing, Great Announcement.

³Old Chinese was the spoken language around the early Zhou dynasty, and Middle Chinese around the Tang dynasty. [6, 11, 10] See also the appendix.

⁴The dates given here assume the Zhou dynasty was founded in 1027 BCE, following Dobson. [1] This is far from certain, the traditional date is 1122 BCE, the modern estimate ca. 1050-1025 BCE. [2] I do however use this estimate consistently, so the relative chronology should be accurate.

台 *yí* is used as a possessive in Eastern Zhou inscriptions, and is very rare otherwise. [3] Graham also suggests that 台 is a fusion of 余 + 之, and that its rarity can be explained by 余/予 being the only pronoun to commonly occur with 之.⁵

我 *wǒ* is used in oracle bone inscriptions, possessive and not, usually referring (due to the nature of the inscriptions) to the Shang court in general, as opposed to 余/予 used by the king to refer to himself. [3]

Example 4. 弗吊天降割於我家

“Impartial Heaven has long delayed sending down harm upon our House”

Shujing, Great Announcement.

Example 5. 洪惟我幼冲人

“How much do I, a young and weak person, ...”

The king speaking of his worries when inheriting the kingdom. Shujing, Great Announcement

Example 6. 今我唯令女二人

“Today, we are going to charge you two men, ...”

Bronze vessel from the reign of king Cheng (ca. 1024-1005 BCE).

From a decree by the 明公 duke of Ming, promoting two subordinates. [1] p. 128, 195

印 *áng* is a rare pronoun, found only in the Shujing and 詩經 Shījīng, usually as a singular. [3, 10] It belongs to a group of similar pronouns found in some early texts, which correspond to adding an -ng ending in the Old

⁵之 in this case being the possessive particle similar to 的 *de*.

Chinese pronunciations. See page 12 for a discussion.

Example 7. 不印自恤

“I do not pity myself”

Shujing, Great Announcement

Graham mentions 魚 *yú* used in a few Zhou inscriptions, as a subject and possessive pronoun, like its descendant 吾 *wú*. [3]

Karlgren identifies a few instances of 言 *yán* used as a first person pronoun, [6] but Schuessler disputes this, citing other possible interpretations, [11] and no other authors mention this. Therefore it will not be considered further.

Analysis of Early Pronouns

Graham and Pulleyblank both think the difference between 余, 予, 朕 and 台 on one hand, and 我, 吾, and 印 on the other, was originally one between singular and plural. [3, 10] Schuessler however writes about 予 that “no strict, if any, distinction between singular and plural” existed in the Chinese of the early Zhou dynasty. [11] Dobson (in [1] p. 23-24, 112) argues that the difference is rather one of status. According to him, 余/予 would not have any particular status connotations, while 朕 implies a lower and 我 a higher status of the speaker. Let’s continue from example 1.

I (余) then was attending my first school, you would not press me (余), your sovereign, then. Now, having patterned myself (我) on the virtue in government of King Wen and, in emulation of King Wen, giving orders to his senior officials, I (余) am going

to command you, Yu, [...] constantly assist me (我), the Lonely One, to rule over the Four Quarters.

Is this an example of a rather intricate system of humble and royal speech? Or is the king, for unknown reasons, using 我 where an old Shang ruler would have used 余 consistently? This illustrates the difficulty of guessing a word's meaning based on context, when the context is usually limited to the king.

Now, consider examples 2, 3, 4, 5 and 7 again. These are all taken from the Great Announcement, a relatively short text that still manages to quote the king using 予, 朕, 我 and 卬 to refer to himself. Example 5, for instance, can hardly be interpreted as plural, nor does it appear to stress the status of the ruler very much. Instead it is rather similar to example 3, using the supposedly humble and singular 朕.

Dobson does not consider the Shijing, but as an example of Western Zhou or early Spring and Autumn Chinese we ought to at least have a look at it, especially since we could break away from the mostly royal setting of the earlier inscriptions and the Shujing. Here, 我 is the norm, occurring frequently as a singular, plural, possessive, and in subject as well as object position. Sometimes 予 is used instead, with no discernible change in “status”, and as both singular and plural. [8, 4] 余 is used once, as a singular object.⁶

Although it is difficult to conclusively rule out the theory that the distinction is due to status, I do not consider the evidence very convincing. It seems more likely that the difference was one between singular and plural, even if we have to accept the explanation that for some reason, in very early times, plural forms started being used in the singular.

⁶谷風, [8] p. 58 and [5] p. 182. Note that 我 and 予 are also used in this ode.

Late Pronouns

Now we move from the language of the Shang and early Zhou dynasty, towards the classical period. Fortunately, most of the early pronouns never made it this far. The two main first person pronouns of Classical Chinese are 我 and 吾. 我 is used in all possible combinations, plural and singular, possessive and non-possessive, subject and object. 吾 on the other hand is limited to pre-verbal⁷ usage, but can also be either possessive or nonpossessive, plural or singular.

予 is used in the classical period as well, but less frequently.

Example 8. 孟孫問孝於我，我對曰無違

“Meng Sun asked me what filial piety was, and I answered him: not being disobedient”

Analects 2.5, [7] p. 147

Example 9. 吾日三省吾身

“I daily examine myself on three points”

Analects 1.4, [7] p. 139

Example 10. 往矣！吾將曳尾於塗中

“Begone! I’d rather be dragging my tail in the mud.”

Zhuangzi on the desirability of obtaining an official position.

Zhuangzi 17.5, [9] p. 164

⁷This usually corresponds to “subject” form, but there are also negation phrases with inverted word order. For example: 雖不吾以 – “Though I am not (now) in office, ...” (Analects 13.14, [7] p. 269)

Example 11. 予所否者

“Wherein I have done improperly”

Analects 6.26, [7] p. 193

Analysis of Late Pronouns

From these examples it would seem that 我, 吾 and 予 can be used interchangeably, within the limits described. This is true to some extent, but various authors argue about the finer points. Pulleyblank argues that 我 is more contrastive than 吾, quoting the Mencius: 彼以其富, 我以吾仁。 “*they* with their honors, *I* with my benevolence,” where 我 is in direct contrast with 彼 *bǐ* (*that/those*). [10] See also example 14. Schuessler writes that 印, the -ng variant of 我 (see page 12), also has this contrastive function. [11]

Graham’s additions to statistics originally due to Karlgren show that 吾 tends to be used more often than 我 as a possessive. [3]

Second Person

The second person pronouns are closely related to, and their story nearly as complex as those of the first person.

女 *nǚ* and its modern form 汝 *rǔ* have been used since the Shang oracle bones as a non-possessive second person pronoun. 乃 *nǎi* was the corresponding possessive form, although 汝 started being used as a possessive in the late classical period, beginning with the Mencius. And vice versa, 乃 was also sometimes used as a subject non-possessive in the Shujing. [3]

In example 6, 女 is used as a plural object.

Example 12. 以乃師右比毛父

“With your troops, protect the Elder of Mao on the right flank”
King 成 Cheng ordering 呂伯 (Earl of Lǔ) to protect the 毛公 Duke of Mao in the campaign to put an end to a rebellion by remnants the previous Shang dynasty.

Bronze vessel from the reign of king Cheng (ca. 1024-1005 BCE).

See [1] p. 126, 180.

而 *ér* is also used as a second person possessive pronoun, found in Eastern Zhou inscriptions and in some classical texts such as the Zhuangzi, where it is also used as a non-possessive subject. 而 can be explained as a fusion of 汝 + 之. [3]

Example 13. 而乃今知之乎

“Do you know it now?”

Zhuangzi chapter 7.1, [10] p. 78.

Here 乃 means “then”, a word which was originally written 迺 *nǎi*, but later written with the character that represented the second person possessive pronoun in early inscriptions. [10]

爾 *ěr* is used in Eastern Zhou inscriptions and older classical texts, where its usage is similar to 汝 as a general second person pronoun in subject and object positions.

Example 14. 爾愛其羊，我愛其禮

“you love the sheep; I love the ceremony”

Analects 3.17, [7] p. 161. (Note the contrastive 我)

若 *ruò* starts being used as a pronoun, similar to the earlier 爾, in the

late classical period. [3, 10]

Example 15. 既使我與若辯矣

“Suppose that you and I have a dispute”

Zhuangzi 2.12, [9] p. 23

戎 *róng* is found only in the Shijing, as a form of 女. See page 12 for a discussion of this and related pronouns.

Example 16. 戎雖小子

“Though you may be (but as) little children”

Shijing, 民勞, [8] p. 497. (Compare example 2)

Analysis

Fortunately, there is no analog of the 我/余 distinction seen in the case of the first person. To express someone’s status, titles are normally used. For details, see [1] p. 113 and [10] p. 78.

There also seems to be no clear difference between the plural and singular for 女/汝, 爾 and 若, nor between subject and object form. However, when the (initially) possessive forms are used as non-possessives, they tend to be limited to subject form, like 吾 in the first person case.

Summary

Please refer to the appendix for a list of the pronouns discussed, and reconstructed pronunciations from different periods. So far I have commented on the *usage* of different characters, without mentioning the attempts that have

been made to explain *why* they are used this way.

Graham points out that some of the rare pronouns ending with -ng (in Mandarin as well as reconstructed Middle Chinese and Old Chinese, refer to the appendix for details) are in fact variants of more common pronouns. [3] Using Karlgren's reconstruction of Old Chinese, these are as follows.

Old Chinese		-ng	Old Chinese
我	ŋâ	印	ŋâŋ
余	djio	陽	djaŋ
汝	ńjo	戎	ńjôŋ

The obvious question now is: how are these variants used? As I have mentioned earlier, both 我 and 印 may have contrastive functions, but in the Shijing 印 is restricted to subject position whereas 我 occurs in both subject and object position. 戎 occurs as a subject and possessive in the Shijing, unlike 女 which is not possessive and not limited to subject position. I will resist the temptation to draw too many conclusions from these few examples in a handful of odes, and leave it at this. 陽 is too rare (Graham lists *one* occurrence) to draw any conclusion at all.

Now there are thirteen characters left to consider, but fortunately several of these are closely related, like 余/予 and 女/汝. According to Graham we can also put 魚/吾 and 爾/若 together as the same word in different stages of development. [3] 台 can be explained as the fusion of 余 + 之 (see page 5), and 而 as 汝 + 之. Now we can group the pronouns we know into five families, listed with Karlgren's Old Chinese pronunciations.

Family	Variant	Ancestor	-ng	+ 之	Possessive
我			𠄎		
𠄎â			𠄎âŋ		
余	予		陽	台	朕
djio	djio		djaŋ	djæg	djəm
汝	女		戎	而	乃
ńjo	njo		ńjôŋ	njæg	næg
吾		魚			
𠄎o		𠄎jo			
若		爾			
ńjak		ńjār			

The first three families (我, 余 and 汝) and their possessives (朕 and 乃) are attested on oracle bones and early inscriptions, while 吾 and 若 belong to later periods.

If we wanted, we could ignore chronology and identify three “greater families,” with 𠄎- initials (我 and 吾), dj- initials (余) and nj- initials (汝 and 若). Pulleyblank suggests that the original difference between the first two of these was between plural (我 and 吾) and singular (余), but that already during the early Zhou dynasty this distinction was breaking down. [10]

What we had in the beginning was sixteen separate characters, with completely different Mandarin pronunciations and only vague differences in usage established. But when we analyze reconstructed Old Chinese pronunciations along with source texts, a pattern emerges. Some details remain obscured behind millennia of copying errors and dying oral traditions, but we know enough to sketch this outline of classical and preclassical Chinese pronouns.

Appendix

MC is reconstructed Middle Chinese (around Tang dynasty) by Karlgren, and OC₁ is Karlgren's Old Chinese (early Zhou) reconstruction. [6] OC₂ is Li Fang-kuei's reconstruction, and OC₃ is Schuessler's own, both found in [11]. I have normalized the IPA pronunciations to the conventions used by Schuessler.

	Pinyin	MC	OC ₁	OC ₂	OC ₃
余	yú	jiwo	djio	rag	lja
予	yú	jiwo	djio	rag	ljaʔ
朕	zhèn	djəm	djəm	drjəmχ	drjəmʔ
台	yí	i	djəg	rəd	ljəj
我	wǒ	ŋâ	ŋâ	ŋarχ	ŋajʔ
印	àng	ŋâŋ	ŋâŋ		
陽	yáng	jiaŋ	djaŋ	raŋ	ljaŋ
魚	yú	ŋjwo	ŋjo	ŋjag	ŋjə
吾	wú	ŋwo	ŋo	ŋag	ya
女	nǚ	njwo	njo	nrjagχ	gnjaʔ
汝	rǔ	ńzjwo	ńjo	njagχ	njaʔ
乃	nǎi	nâi	nəg	nəgχ	nəʔ
而	ér	ńzi	ńjəg	njəg	njə
爾	ěr	ńzje	ńjār	njarχ	njajʔ
若	ruò	ńzjak	ńjak	tjəg	tjə
戎	róng	ńzjuŋ	ńjôŋ	ŋjəŋw	njəwŋ
之	zhī	tí	ťjəg	tjəg	tjə
言	yán	ŋjən	ŋjǎn		

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