

“Self, Other, and Canine”:
The “Dog” Radical in Chinese History and Its Implications for Chinese Minority Identity

One of the peculiarities of the Chinese characters as they have evolved throughout the centuries is the presence of “dog” and “insect” radicals in the ideograms of ethnic minorities. While most of these characters have been greatly changed with the character simplification project and the ethnic classification project of the 1950s, one can still see the legacy of this phenomenon today in words such as “野蛮” (primitive, barbarian), which has the “insect” radical 虫 at the bottom of the second character, or “狮子” lion, which has the “dog” radical on the side of the first character. Analyzing which characters in Chinese have traditionally been written with the “dog” radical and examining the history of where and why this method of classification arose in China can give us insight into how the Chinese have conceived of the minority peoples living within the Chinese cultural area. In reality, tracing the variations of how a particular Chinese ideogram was written within the context of Chinese history is probably the best way to determine the significance that particular name or idea had to the scribes writing it; we must therefore view individual ideograms as dictionaries and encyclopedias, replete with otherwise unknown historical and cultural information. Tracing the history of the “dog” radical demonstrates that local mythology influences the writing of a character or characters, and subsequently demonstrates how the writing of one character can indiscriminately influence others that come to be associated with it through a kind of semantic extension. Finally, we will also observe that the 20th century reform of the Chinese character set was met with a simultaneously reappraisal of Chinese minority identity and with it, a reappraisal of what it means to be Chinese.

To begin with, it may be helpful to elucidate the cases in contemporary Chinese where the “dog” radical appears, so as to have a sense what a Chinese scribe would have envisioned when he wrote this particular signifier next to an ethnic group’s name. Among the earliest methods of writing the character for dog was *quan* 犬. When attached to another ideogram, the signifier was simply reduced to 犭, which would have appeared to the left of the base of the ideogram. Many four legged animals such as pig (*zhu* 猪), lion (*shizi* 狮子), wolf (*lang* 狼) and cat (*mao* 猫), take the radical on their left side. The reason for the common “dog” classifier among these animals is, like the “duck” glyph which acted like the “bird” classifier within the ancient Egyptian glyphs¹, the “dog” was representative of many mammalian quadrupeds to the early Chinese scribes. But while the “dog” radical was often used for animals, it also had other connotations in pre-modern China.

The “dog” radical is often found in words, especially adjectives, with a very negative, almost anti-social connotation. Examples of this include “crafty, cunning” (*jiao* 狡), “sly” (*kuai* 猾), “to violate, offend” (*fan* 犯), “prisoner” (*fanren* 犯人), “timid” (*juan* 狷), “arrogant, insane” (*kuang* 狂), “violent” (*li* 戾), and “lonely” (*du* 獨). Very early in Chinese history, sometime during the Zhou Dynasty (771-221 BC), a group of foreigners to the north of China received the name *beidi* (北狄), which has subsequently been translated as “northern barbarians.” This was probably not simply one group of people, but rather collections of tangentially associated tribes. “Barbarians” therefore is not a sufficient translation for *beidi* (北狄) considering how many different people were considered to be “barbarian” by different names during this period. The Zhou Dynasty formally acknowledged a total of four “barbarian” peoples that surrounded their

¹See Goldwasser, Orly, “The Principles of the hieroglyphic script,” “The new theories of categorization,” *Prophets, Lovers, and Giraffes: World Classification in Ancient Egypt*, p. 20.

empire: *dongyi* (東夷), *xirong* (西戎), *nanman* (南蠻), and *beidi* (北狄), which mean “eastern barbarians,” “western barbarians,” “southern barbarians” and “northern barbarians” respectively, by the conventional standards of translation. Of these four people, one of them, the “northern barbarians” is written with the “dog” radical, and one, the “southern barbarians” is written with the “insect” radical. The tradition of using such classifiers to write minorities continued into the Han Dynasty (202 BC – 220 AD), where the most common way of writing the characters for the northern *Xiong-nu* people (匈奴) involved the inclusion of the “dog” radical, though this was eliminated in the 20th century.² From this point in Chinese history onward, the “dog” radical was appended to many of the characters for ethnic minorities; hence the “dog” radical and its negative connotations were applied to many ethnic minorities through a kind of semantic extension. While it is clear that the presence of such classifiers reflects a negative attitude towards these people, it is still essential to ask how this method of classification arose and how it developed within the context of Chinese culture and history.

In order to discern the possible origins of the presence of the “dog” radical Chinese words, we must look to the early mythology of the Yao (瑤) people, who today live in southern China in the province of Yunnan, near Laos and Vietnam. In the 116th chapter of the classic Chinese text “The History of the later Han” (*Hou Han Shu* 後漢書), written in the 5th century AD, there is a famous story possibly related to these people titled the “myth of Pan Hu.” According to the mythical story, Pan Hu was a divine dog who married an emperor’s daughter and subsequently fathered a new race of “dog-man” people. Today the Yao people still hold his story as one of the “origin-stories” of their people. Furthermore, the author of the *Hou Han Shu*,

²The eradication process of these “dog” radical-characters was so successful, it is today impossible to find the name *Xiong-nu*, among other ethnic minority “ethnonyms”, with the “dog-radical” on most Chinese character producing software, hence its absence here. Today, many Chinese people are unaware that the ethnic minorities which today are celebrated in China as examples of the diversity of “Chinese” culture, were once written with the “dog” radical.

Fan Ye, locates the descendants of the “dog-man” people on “the southeast coast” of China – almost precisely where the Yao people live today. But according to de Groot, “the *beidi* (北狄) were declared to be the offspring of dogs during the Zhou Dynasty”³ These seemingly contradictory facts lead us to several questions: why did the Zhou Dynasty begin marking its northern barbarians with the “dog” radical? How reflective is the *Hou Han Shu* of the Chinese perspective of the “dog-man” people for 5th century China? And most of all, how did the “dog” radical travel from the north to the south over the course of a few centuries?

It appears that Fan Ye’s treatment of the “dog-man” people is fairly reliable and its implications for tracing the evolution of the usage of the “dog” radical are quite significant for several reasons. First of all, David Gordan White located the origin of the Yao people to be in the north, in particular Shaanxi, Hunan, and Anhui provinces. Thus, the Yao people, or their related brethren, would have been a part of what the group that had been previously called the *beidi* 北狄 barbarians during the Zhou Dynasty, centuries earlier. Similar dog-man myths existed among the Altaic and Turkic steppe peoples, which also helps to substantiate the historicity of the Yao peoples’ origin from the northern plains.⁴ Because most foreign invasions came from the north, many groups that were located in the north 2,000 years ago live in southern China today.

With these facts in mind, we can draw several conclusions: the various northern steppe peoples had a “dog-man” myth which demonstrated their descent from a dog, which was not considered a negative thing within their cultural context (The Chinese considered the concept of the “dog-man” negative and associated their dog radical with “negative” traits as discussed earlier; the Yao people on the other hand would have had a very different conception of it.) Second, it appears that the ancestors of the Yao people who lived in the north likewise had the

³ deGroot, p. 168.

⁴ See White, David Gordan. *Myths of the Dog-Man*, p. 145.

same or similar “dog-myth” and carried it with them as they migrated southward towards Laos and Vietnam. Third, in the centuries-long process of this migration to the south, the Chinese scholarly elite, whose capital would have generally been based in the north, came to associate many of their non-Han subjects with myths of the “dog-man,” a practice which in turn certainly influenced the writing of the characters for the Yao people, the *Xiong-nu* people, and other minority groups. White delineated this phenomenon in his book *Myths of the Dog Man*:

We can be quite certain that the Man or Yao peoples, even though they considered themselves to be descended from a dog, nevertheless did not call themselves dogs. Only the Chinese would have done so. Once again, as was the case with the *Xiong-nu* and so many other peoples, the foreigner is rendered anonymous...by being even the same animal signifier as every other foreigner. (White, p. 145)

The implications are intriguing: we have an example of a Chinese character that may have been influenced by a non-Chinese mythology because the fact that these northern peoples held they were descended from dogs may have been the most prominent thing Chinese scribes knew about them.⁵ Moreover, the usage of the “dog” radical spread to the people living around the Yao by the time they settled in the south of China, so that the “Kih, Ling, Miao, Nao, Yao, Lolo, Li and Chung” were all written with “dog” radicals by the early Ming Dynasty.⁶ Through tracing the origins and development of the “dog” radical, we can conclude that it probably had a specific origin in northwestern China, spread to the south of China, but in the process came to be applied through semantic extension to minority peoples in general as it helped the Chinese “center” define many, but not all, foreign peoples.

⁵There is a certain amount of academic debate around whether the Chinese believed their minorities were descended from dogs, and over the centuries the minorities simply adopted the legends as their own or whether the “man dog” legends informed Chinese scholars about the origins of the peoples. Some scholars, such as J.J. M de Groot cite the fact that many of these “canine origin” stories are recorded in Chinese texts, which draws suspicion upon a theoretical non-Chinese origin. Nevertheless, more recently some scholars, such as David Gordan White, using Joseph Campbell’s methodology, have found similar “dog man” origin stories across Central Asia and have thus supported in their academic work the non-Chinese origins of the stories.

⁶See White, David Gordan. *Myths of the Dog-Man*, p. 157

Of China's many minority peoples, which ones were not written with the "dog" radical and why? Some of the characters for China's northeastern minorities, Mongols, Uyghurs, and Tibetans, do not seem to have been regularly written with the "dog" radical. The *jie* (羯) people of China's northwest were written with a "sheep" (羊) radical, probably because they were associated with herding. The character for the Manchu (*manzu* 满族) people who established the last Chinese imperial dynasty, the Qing, was written with a "water" (氵) radical, possibly because their ancestral home, Manchuria, was a coastal region on China's northwest frontier. Tibetans, known in different periods of Chinese history as *fan* (番) and *zang* (藏), never appear to haven taken a "dog" radical or any other derogatory classifier. With this in mind, we can safely conclude that certain classifiers came to be specifically associated with various ethnic minorities on the basis of special traits or characteristics. However, none of the hitherto mentioned groups bears an association with a "dog-man" myth and none of the groups is from southern China, where it appears most minority peoples who were written with "dog" classifiers lived during the past 1,000 years. More importantly, many of these peoples themselves formed powerful states which militarily and politically rivaled their Chinese counterparts. Wolfram Eberhard wrote in *China's Minorities: Yesterday and Today*:

There is a significant difference between tribes in the North and West and tribes in the South of China proper. Those in the North and West who had social organizations that looked to the Chinese like a state and who were powerful were called by a term that attempted to transliterate their own names and which did not use the dog classifier.⁷

It is important to note that the Mongols and Manchus both conquered China and established their own dynasties within the Chinese cultural area. Further, in support of Eberhard's claim, neither group's Chinese character included a "dog" radical. The same is true for the Tibetans, who in

⁷ Eberhard, p. 103)

763 AD conquered the Chinese capital of Xi'an. We must therefore make an exception to our analysis of the development of the “dog” radical: the minorities were generally located in the south by the beginning of the second millennium, were associated with a “dog man” myth, and did not have a political infrastructure to rival the Chinese state. One [such](#) significance exception to this generalization however is the Chinese “Hui” Muslims, whose name at times was written with the “dog” classifier.

Hui Muslims have long been considered a minority people within the Chinese cultural area. Termed “familiar strangers” by the contemporary Hui scholar Jonathan Lipman, Hui Muslims descend from Arab, Persian, Turkish, and Mongolian Muslims who arrived in China between the Tang and Yuan Dynasties. The process by which these Muslims became Chinese is a long and largely undocumented one. Upon first reaching during the Tang Dynasty, China Muslims were known as *fanke*, or “barbarians who stay as guests.” Several hundred years later by the Song Dynasty, Chinese Muslims became known as *tusheng fanke*, or “barbarians who stay as guests, who were born here.” By the beginning of the Ming Dynasty however Muslims were given the name “Hui” (回), which in Chinese means “to return” and might signify a continuation in the “barbarian guest” idea by positing that the Hui would one day return to the “non-Chinese” land of their origin. Nevertheless, by the Ming Dynasty, it became clear that the Hui were not leaving: Persian slowly disappeared as the local Hui lingua-franca, and many Hui participated in government and [took](#) the Civil Service Examination. [As](#) Dru Gladney wrote of the Hui during this period: “Han chauvinism found its most derogatory expression in the Ming Dynasty by adding to the Chinese ideograph for Hui (回) the radical for “dog” (犭).”⁸ But at the same time, the early Manchu Qing emperors, in the wake of Han persecution of the Hui, were famous for

⁸ Gladney, p. 300)

repeating: “The Han and Hui are one people.” With these contradictory realities in mind, what explains the occasional usage of the “dog” radical in the context of China’s Hui Muslims?

It has already been established that the association of the Yao people with the “dog man” myths precipitated the association of the Chinese character for the Yao people and their immediate neighbors with the “dog” radical. While this phenomenon to a certain extent spread to other minorities within the Chinese cultural area, we have also noted that this was not done indiscriminately, as the characters of certain minority peoples who were perceived as powerful were explicitly not written with the radical. The Hui however had no connection with a “dog man” myth, nor were they located primarily in the south. But by the early Ming Dynasty, the character for the Hui people had begun to be written with the “dog” radical on at least certain occasions, often tied to local circumstances. David Atwill, in his book *The Chinese Sultanate*, wrote in reference to the extremely violent Hui insurrection of the 19th century, the Panthay Rebellion:

Although the Hui were not considered *Yi* (barbarian), they did not escape many of the derogatory characterizations employed by the Han when describing the non-Han. The clearest indication of this is that many chroniclers appended a “dog” radical to the Hui character – a practice reserved almost exclusively for ethnonyms of the *yi* peoples, who were viewed as culturally inferior by the Han.⁹

Thus, beginning in the Ming Dynasty but continuing until the 20th century, the character for Hui at times was written with the “dog” radical during periods of political persecution or insurrection. In reality, we can only approach the question of the Hui locally because of the fact that, more than any other Chinese ethnic group, the Hui are located in nearly every province of China, unlike the Tibetans, Mongols, or Uyghurs who are located in specific areas. Chinese people, from Beijing to Chengdu were thus confronted with Hui communities speaking Chinese and adopting Chinese customs but who remained nonetheless distinct from the Han population.

⁹ Atwill, p. 36

The particularity of the occasions when the “dog” radical was used to designate the Hui people can thus tell us something about the “dog” radical itself – that, by the 17th and 18th centuries, the “dog” radical reflected a purely “barbarian” “otherness” quality that was fundamentally mutable, unlike the “dog myth” origins of other Chinese minorities, which once associated with a group seemed to be fixed.¹⁰ In the case of the Panthay Rebellion of Yunnan that Atwill mentioned, in the face of an impending Han massacre of their people, the Hui established an independent state for over ten years until it was suppressed by the Qing. The addition of the “dog” radical during this period then underscores that while the Hui were pulling away from the Chinese cultural area, Chinese scribes reflected this “pulling away” by emphasizing Hui “otherness” in the writing of their ideogram. In short, the presence of the “dog” radical in the Hui context gives us an example where we can be sure there was absolutely no connection to a “dog man” myth – the “dog” radical, used only sporadically in the case of the Hui, nevertheless was indubitably used to reflect the “otherness”, “foreignness”, and “barbaric” qualities of the group when there was a call for these attributes to be accentuated.

The story of the Chinese “dog” radical ends in the 1950s with the state-sponsored simplification effort to streamline the Chinese character set. According to Zhou Youguang in *The Historical Evolution of Chinese Languages and Scripts*, the project involved two major phases between 1955 and 1956: the “eradication of variations of individual characters” and the “simplification of complicated characters.” As the “dog” radical was considered a “variation” of the ways to write certain minority names, the use of it was eradicated by 1955, along with 1,052 other “variations” in the writing of certain ideograms. Though it has been seldom noted in academic publications, the state simplification project coincided historically with the ethnic

¹⁰ In the context of Chinese history and the Confucian tradition, it was possible for minority, non-Han groups to “receive, accept culture” *laihua* 來化.

classification project – the *minzu shibie gongzuo* (民族识别工作) and the case of the “minority problem” was an area where both projects inevitably met. In [With](#) regards to the ethnic classification project, teams of ethnographers and anthropologists were sent out to various geographical regions to record and report how many “ethnic minorities” existed in a particular area. The efforts varied widely: Thomas Mullaney reported in [his article](#) “Ethnic Classification Writ Large: The 1954 Yunnan Province Ethnic Classification Project and its Foundations in Republican-Era Taxonomic Thought” that the anthropologists in Yunnan initially believed there were hundreds of minorities living in that single province. Upon hearing this, the central government demanded the number be streamlined, as Mao wanted all minorities to be represented at the 1956 People’s Congress, but certainly not hundreds of them. Ultimately, China was proclaimed to have merely fifty-five recognized ethnic minorities across the entire country and one, unified Han people. Thus, as the Chinese characters were streamlined in the 1950s, so were the ethnic minorities themselves. In terms of the character simplification project, the “dog” radical had to be eliminated because it represented a variation in the writing of the characters, but in terms of the ethnic identification project of the 1950s, the “dog” radical had to be eliminated because all ethnic groups were now considered “Chinese” even if they were not considered “Han,” a distinction that was not made historically. Two thousand years of systematic and cultural exclusion was methodically overturned in the 20th century, with the birth of the modern Chinese nation state and its concept of citizenship which held that citizens of a nation could not be considered radically differentiated from each other, let alone considered or associated with “dogs.”

The delineation of the history of the “dog” radical within the Chinese character set reveals much about Chinese history and the place of ethnic minorities within it. It appears that

originally the “dog” radical may not have held an inherently negative meaning but rather have been reflective of the myths of certain peoples, such as the Yao. Throughout the centuries, in light of migrations and new associations, the “dog” radical became applied to many minorities, particularly those living in the south of China who originated from the Northern Steppes. In this process, the “dog” radical was conceived of in a new, negative light reflecting the “otherness” and “barbarity” of these minorities within the Chinese cultural area. Among all ethnic minorities who became associated with the “dog” radical, the Hui are among the most interesting because of the fact it was applied to them only sporadically during periods of inter-ethnic civil unrest and strife. This fact reflects that, by the late Imperial period, the “dog” radical had lost most, if not all of its original significance as a classifier of origin myths or native characters but simply meant “otherness”, “foreignness” and “non-civility.” This was changed when, in the 20th century, China reformed the traditional character set and simultaneously became a nation-state with a modern conception of citizenship, both of which contributed to the termination of the “dog” radical as a classifier for minority ideograms. The 20th century has therefore seen an expansion in what it means to be Chinese as well as a contraction in the size and complexity of its writing system – two seemingly unrelated facts which are thoroughly linked in the case of the country’s ethnic minorities. Tracing the history of the “dog” radical reminds us however that the only way to trace the notion of Chinese identity is through examining the historical perceptions of the “familiar strangers” of China – the people who, while not being Chinese lived amongst the Chinese, and whose names were marked as graphically different because of it.

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