



The Historical Replacement and Causing of the Second Personal Pronouns RU(汝) & ER(尔)

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Abstract

The second personal pronouns RU(汝) & ER(尔) appeared frequently in ancient Chinese. When did they appear? And how did they complete their rise and fall in ancient Chinese? Taking bronze inscriptions, *Jin Wen Shangshu* and *The Book of Songs* as examples, this paper has sorted out the clues of the rise and fall in the history of the second personal pronouns - RU(汝) & ER(尔), and intends to reveal the causing of their rise and fall.

Key words: RU(汝); ER(尔); Historical Replacement

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INTRODUCTION

As a second personal pronoun, RU(汝) is often used in ancient Chinese, and it appeared many times in the Classic Works Before Qin Dynasty. In a certain period, as a high-frequency personal pronoun, it used to enjoy great popularity. However, due to the development of society and the self-adjustment and rise and fall of the internal factors in the Language System, the second personal pronoun RU(汝) has been gradually replaced by ER(尔) which is a new comer. How did they complete their rise and fall in ancient Chinese? What is the cause of the rise and fall between RU(汝) and ER(尔)? Using oracle bone inscriptions, bronze inscriptions, *Jin Wen Shangshu* and

the Book of Songs as research materials, and based on word-frequency statistic and diachronic study, this paper intends to find the historical clues of the rise and fall of the second personal pronouns RU(汝) & ER(尔), and reveal its internal causing of their rise and fall. It is beneficial to both the comprehension of the development of the second personal pronouns RU(汝)& ER(尔) and the research in the history of Chinese language.

The research methodology in this paper contains both quantity analyses and quality analyses. In the part of *Shangshu*, the syntax of only twenty eight articles among *Jin Wen Shangshu* are analyzed because they are widely acknowledged in its academic field, while twenty five false ancient Chinese are suspected as pseudographs and thus are excluded from this study. (For more information of the discussion on the false ancient Chinese in *Shangshu*, please refer to the historical documents of scholars in Qing Dynasty) By applying the method of exhaustive corpus analysis, this paper studies oracle bone inscriptions, bronze inscriptions, *Jin Wen Shangshu* and *The Book of Songs* with closed analysis, exhaustive statistics, word by word locating, and fixed number analysis. As for the problems of punctuation bifurcation and lexical ambiguity in *Jin Wen Shangshu*, we uses the analysis of lattice site and singular and plurality in Zhou Bing-jun's legibility of *Shangshu* and vernacular Chinese of *Shangshu* as the criterion (Qian, 2004).

RU(汝) is originally the phonetic loan character of ER(尔) and it is written as RV(女) whose original meaning is "woman", which is one of the earliest second personal pronouns in the Pre-Qin Period. It appeared in oracle bone inscriptions in the Shang Dynasty. RV(女) has been found in oracle bone inscriptions, while the character of RU(汝) has not appeared. Based on the existing documents, as a second personal pronoun, the character of RU(汝) was used earliest in *Jin Wen Shangshu*. It is worthwhile to note that *ShuoWen Jiezi* in Han Dynasty explains that RU(汝) is the name of a river, regarding

RU(女) as a phonetic complement. In fact, both RU(汝) and RV(女) are identical in pronunciation, but their meanings are different. RV(女), interpreted as “woman”, was also a high-frequency word in the pre-Qin period, while its meaning is totally different from RU(女) which is borrowed as a second personal pronoun, and we must strictly distinguish between RU(女) and RV(女).

When did ER(尔) appear as the second personal pronoun? Yi Meng-chun ever said in his grammar study on the pre-Qin period: In the oracle bone inscriptions and bronze inscriptions, ER(尔) is not used as the second personal pronoun. As the second personal pronoun, it appears first in *Jin Wen Shangshu* (Yi, 2005). But this opinion is controversial. According to related research and statistics, ER(尔), as the second personal pronoun, did not appear in the oracle bone inscriptions, however, it did appear in the bronze inscriptions. The frequency of the second personal pronoun ER(尔) increased greatly at the time when *Jin Wen Shangshu* appeared, which had surpassed RU(女) to some extent.

1. EXAMPLES OF RU(汝) & ER(尔) USED AS SECOND PERSONAL PRONOUN IN LITERATURE

At present, according to the existing published oracle-bone inscriptions, RU(汝) & ER(尔) used as second personal pronouns have not found, so we can not find an example.

1.1 Examples of RU(汝) & ER(尔) Used in Bronze Inscriptions

1.1.1 Examples of RU(汝) & ER(尔) Used in Bronze Inscriptions

RU(汝) appears 129 times in bronze inscriptions, and it is mainly used as the subject, object and compound words, for example:

(1) Examples of RU(汝) used as the subject in bronze inscriptions:

- ① RU(you) can use this music instrument to offer sacrifice. (Zheshe Bo, *Yinzhou Jinwen Jicheng* 1.123)
- ② RU(you) should be loyal to your boss. (Shushi Zhong, *Yinzhou Jinwen Jicheng* 1.272-8)
- ③ RU(you) should make all-out efforts to assist me. (Shushi Zhong, *Yinzhou Jinwen Jicheng* 1.281)
- ④ RU(you) should not sap your spirit by seeking pleasures, which will lead to failure. (Ranzheng Xu, *Yinzhou Jinwen Jicheng* 2.428)
- ⑤ RU(you) should take your subordinates to help me. (Jingfu Ding, *Yinzhou Jinwen Jicheng* 5.2671)

(2) Examples of RU(汝) used as the object in bronze inscriptions:

- ① RU(you) will be awarded 4 officers who are in charge of the Central plain area, and 659 labors, ranging from divers to civilians. (Dayu Ding, *Yinzhou Jinwen Jicheng* 5.2837)

② RU(you) are required to manage the state and the royal family affairs. (Maogong Ding, *Yinzhou Jinwen Jicheng* 5.2841)

③ RU(you) must live up to your duties. (Hu Gui Lid, *Archaeology and Cultural Relics*, 1997(3))

④ Now I award RU(you) 5 shields and a copper dagger with decorations of red tassels. (Ni Zhong, *Yinzhou Jinwen Jicheng* 1.60-3)

⑤ I will reward RU(you) ten families of servants. (Ling Ding, *Yinzhou Jinwen Jicheng* 5.2803)

(3) Examples of RU(汝) used as the compound words in bronze inscriptions:

RU(you) will be rewarded handsomely. (Jinfu Ding, *Yinzhou Jinwen Jicheng* 5.2671)

1.1.2 Examples of ER(尔) Used in Bronze Inscriptions

ER(尔) is mainly used as the object and attribute, for example:

- ① ER(you) can use Dou You to offer sacrifice in the temple. (Dou You, *Yinzhou Jinwen Jicheng* 10.5401)
- ② ER(you) are such an ignorant boy. (He Zun, *Yinzhou Jinwen Jicheng* 11.6014)
- ③ ER(you) will be blessed. (Xing Zhong, *Yinzhou Jinwen Jicheng* 1.246)
- ④ ER(you) will be blessed with happiness and a natural death. (Xing Zhong, *Yinzhou Jinwen Jicheng* 1.254)
- ⑤ In the past, ER(your) father has done a great job to assist Wen King. (He Zun, *Yinzhou Jinwen Jicheng* 11.6014)

1.1.3 The Statistical Table of the Frequency of RU(汝) & ER(尔) Used in Bronze Inscriptions

Table 1
The Frequency of RU(汝) & ER(尔) Used in Bronze Inscriptions

| Personal pronouns | Usage | | | | Total |
|-------------------|---------|--------|----------------|-----------|-------|
| | Subject | Object | Compound words | Modifiers | |
| RU(汝) | 27 | 67 | 34 | 1 | 129 |
| ER(尔) | | 7 | | 1 | 8 |

1.2 The Examples in *Jin Wen Shangshu*

1.2.1 The Examples of RU(汝) Are Used in *Jin Wen Shangshu*

As a second personal pronoun, RU(汝) appears 148 times in *Jin Wen Shangshu*, and it is used as a subject 92 times, object 31 times, attribute 5 times, apposition 16 times, and compound word 4 times. In addition, it is used as a singular pronoun 84 times and plural pronoun 64 times. It is mainly used as subject, object and attribute. Examples are as follows:

(1) Examples of RU(汝) used as the subject in *Jin Wen Shangshu*

- ① The Emperor said: Come on, RU(汝) shun. Over the past three years, I queried your political activities,

investigated your statements and I accept your achievements. (*Yuxiashu-Shundian*)

② The Emperor said: All right, RU(汝) can go. (*Yuxiashu-Shundian*)

③ The Emperor said: All right, go! RU(汝) hold the post of officials, RU(汝) and they can go. (*Yuxiashu-Shundian*)

④ Now, RU(汝) maybe ask: What did Xiajie commit a big sin? (*Shangshu-Tangshi*)

⑤ The Emperor said: Come on, Yu! RU(汝) can talk about their own opinions. (*Yuxiashu-Yiji*)

⑥ If RU(汝) have a number of important questions and doubts ,you must think again and again. (*Zhoushu-Hongfan*)

⑦ RU(汝) can't report my kindnesses, this is your curse. (*Shangshu-Pangeng Part One*)

⑧ The Emperor said: Ah, Feng, RU(汝) should think deeply. (*Zhoushu-Kanggao*)

⑨ The Emperor's masses have discretion and integrity, RU(汝) should worry about them. (*Zhoushu-Hongfan*)

(2) Examples of RU(汝) used as the object in Jin Wen Shangshu

I warn RU(汝) that Hu shi despise the five elements, abandon his right way. (*Yuxiashu-Ganshi*)

② I will use RU(汝) as slaves or kill RU(汝). (*Yuxiashu-Ganshi*)

③ They are told that the masses resent RU(you) and swear at RU(you). (*Yuxiashu-Wuyi*)

④ I will make speeches to RU(you). (*Zhoushu-Qinshi*)

(3) Examples of RU(汝) used as the attribute in Jin Wen Shangshu

① RU(you) can talk about your opinions. (*Yuxiashu-Yiji*)

② I call you to live in the new city, and this is because of RU(you). (*Shangshu-Pangeng Part One*)

③ You can't follow RU(your) will. (*Zhoushu-Kanggao*)

(4) Examples of RU(汝) used as the compound words in Jin Wen Shangshu

I command RU(you) to govern the music and teach the children of nobles. (*Yuxiashu-Shundian*)

1.2.2 Examples of ER(尔) Used in Jin Wen Shangshu

In *Jin Wen Shangshu*, ER(尔) is used as the second personal pronoun for 161 times, and it is used as a subject 63 times, object 18 times, attribute 39 times, and apposition 41 times. Moreover, it used as a singular pronoun for 8 times, plural pronoun 153 times, and it is also mainly used as a subject, object and attribute. Examples are as follows:

(1) Examples of ER(尔) used as the subject in Jin Wen Shangshu

① ER(you) don't doubt, and I don't draws back from what she promises. (*Shangshu-Tangshi*)

② The Emperor said: Come on, ER(you) must listen to me. (*Shangshu-Tangshi*)

③ ER(you) should respect the heaven and serve me. (*Zhoushu-Lüxing*)

(2) Examples of ER(尔) used as the object in Jin Wen Shangshu

① If ER(you) respect my Zhou Dynasty, God will give ER(you) mercy. (*Zhoushu-Duoshi*)

② Come on, the feudal princes, ER(尔) should use benevolence than punishment. (*Zhoushu-Lüxing*)

③ I don't want to persuade you, and I just tell the God's order to ER(you). (*Zhoushu-Duofang*)

(3) Examples of ER(尔) used as the attribute in Jin Wen Shangshu

① Now you must live ER(your) city and go on living. (*Zhoushu-Duoshi*)

② Now I sacrifice my ancestors, ER(your) ancestors also enjoyed the sacrifices. (*Shangshu-Pangeng Part One*)

③ Compassionate ER(your) people living in the capital, and accomplish ER(your) moral integrity. (*Zhoushu-Wenhoushiming*)

(4) Examples of ER(尔) used as the independent tongue in Jin Wen Shangshu

① Now, I tell ER(you) , the minister of Yin kingdom, it is not that Zhou kingdom invade Yin kingdom. (*Zhoushu-Duoshi*)

② ER(you), as the minister of Yin kingdom, listen to me, now I obey God's orders respectfully. (*Zhoushu-Duoshi*)

1.2.3 The Statistical Table of the Frequency of RU(汝) & ER(尔) Used in Jin Wen Shangshu

Table 2
The Frequency of RU(汝) & ER(尔) Used in Jin Wen Shangshu

| Personal pronouns title | RU(汝)(total 148) | ER(尔)(total 161) |
|-------------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Yao Dian | 17 | 0 |
| Gao Tao Mo | 9 | 0 |
| Gan Shi | 5 | 0 |
| Tang Shi | 6 | 5 |
| Pan peng | 39 | 17 |
| Xi Bo Ji Li | 0 | 1 |
| Wei Zi | 0 | 1 |
| Mu Shi | 0 | 5 |
| Hong Fan | 13 | 0 |
| Jing Feng | 0 | 6 |
| Da Gao | 0 | 14 |
| Kang Gao | 19 | 0 |
| Jiu Gao | 4 | 8 |
| Zi Cai | 1 | 0 |
| Luo Gao | 8 | 0 |
| Duo Shi | 0 | 34 |
| Wu Yi | 4 | 0 |

To be continued

Continued

| Personal pronouns title | RU(汝)(total 148) | ER(尔)(total 161) |
|-------------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Jun Shi | 9 | 0 |
| Duo Feng | 0 | 52 |
| Li Zheng | 0 | 1 |
| Gu Ming | 2 | 4 |
| Lü Xing | 0 | 8 |
| Wen Hou Zhi Ming | 4 | 5 |
| Fei Shi | 7 | 0 |
| Qin Shi | 1 | 0 |

1.3 Examples in *The Book of Songs*

1.3.1 Examples of RU(汝) Used in *The Book of Songs*

- ① Wen King groaning regretful that RU(you) are the last King of Shang dynasty. (*The Book of Songs-Dang*)
- ② You are the monsters of iniquity who developed the tendency for the emperor. (*The Book of Songs-Dang*)
- ③ The red bamboo flute is brilliant, RU(you) looks like the red bamboo and I like RU(you). (*The Book of Songs-JingNv*)
- ④ Only I and RU(you) can share in disaster and terror. (*The Book of Songs-GuFeng*)

1.3.2 Examples of ER(尔) Used in *The Book of Songs*

- ① Gentleman owns happiness, and God bless ER(your) descendants. (*The Book of Songs-Nanshanyoutai*)
- ② I miss ER(you) very much and miss makes me sad. (*The Book of Songs-Fur Clothing*)
- ③ I miss ER(you) very much and I want to be with you forever. But you dare not run away with me. (*The Book of Songs-Dache*)
- ④ ER(you) drift apart brothers and common people will imitate you. (*The Book of Songs-Jiaogong*)

2. THE ANALYSIS OF THE FREQUENCY OF RU(汝) & ER(尔) AND THEIR CHANGE TRAJECTORY

Statistical table of the frequency of RU(汝) & ER(尔) used in the literatures

Table 3
The Frequency of RU(汝) & ER(尔) Used in the Literatures

| Frequency | Personal pronouns | RU(汝) | ER(尔) |
|--------------------------|-------------------|-------|-------|
| bronze inscriptions | | 129 | 8 |
| <i>Jin Wen Shangshu</i> | | 148 | 161 |
| <i>the Book of Songs</i> | | 47 | 196 |

According to the statistical table above, it is clear that in Shang and Xizhou Dynasty, RU(汝), as the second

personal pronoun, was used more frequently than ER(尔). And it has an overwhelming advantage in the using as a second personal pronoun, which makes it the representative second personal pronoun. As time flies, in the time of *Shangshu*, both RU(汝) & ER(尔) become the main second personal pronoun, and ER(尔) appears 161 times, RU(汝) 141 times. Although ER(尔) appears later than RU(汝), it is used more frequently in *Shangshu*. RU(汝), however, appears earlier than ER(尔), but it has shown a recession tendency, and its using frequency declined. With the development of society and the adjustment of the internal factors in language system, in the time of the *Book of Songs*(about Xizhou Dynasty to the middle of Chunqiu Dynasty), RU(汝) merely appears 47 times, while ER(尔) appears 196 times, and there is a huge disparity between RU(汝) & ER(尔) in using frequency. ER(尔), as the second personal pronoun, has an overwhelming advantage, and it has replaced RU(汝) to become the main second personal pronoun. So it can be inferred that ER(尔), as a second personal pronoun, has replaced RU(汝) and the historical change completed in the middle of Chunqiu Dynasty(the time of *the Book of Songs*).

3. STUDY ON THE MOTIVATION OF THE HISTORICAL REPLACEMENT BETWEEN RU(汝) AND ER(尔)

Why can “ER” replace “RU”, and complete the historical replacement? What is the intrinsic motivation of the historical replacement? According to our comprehensive study, we can infer that the intrinsic motivations of the historical replacement are as follows:

3.1 ER(尔) Has More Comprehensive Grammatical Function Than RU(汝)

According to relevant statistical data, it is clear that, compared with RU(汝), ER(尔) enjoys more comprehensive grammatical functions. For example, in *jinwen Shangshu*, ER appears 161 times in all, of which as subject is 63 times, object 18 times, attribute 39 times, appositive 41 times, while in *jinwen Shangshu*, RU(汝) are used 148 times, of which as subject is 92 times, and the proportion of the total times as the subject is more than 60%. We can conclude that ER(尔) can be used as subject, object, attribute, appositive, but the grammatical function of RU(汝) is fewer and in classical symmetry pronouns system, ER(尔) enjoys higher degree of freedom and selectivity. The evolution of Chinese synonyms is inclined to words with highest degree of freedom and selectivity, which is the root cause of ER(尔) being in vogue (Qian, 2004).

3.2 The Self-Adjustment of Internal Personal Pronouns System

As a part of personal pronoun, the second personal pronoun is positively influenced and restricted by the

entire evolution of the personal pronoun system, and the second personal pronoun is particularly susceptible influenced by the first-person pronoun. The rapid expansion of ER(尔) is closely associated with the push of the first-person pronoun “I”. In classical claiming systems, the first personal pronoun “I” enjoys the most comprehensive grammatical function and the most exuberant vitality. As the second-person pronoun, ER(尔) is particularly susceptible influenced by the first personal pronoun “I” (Qian, 2004). Professor Wang Li once pointed out that, “ER” is matched to “I” in ancient personal pronoun system (Wang, 1985). And as the personal pronoun with the most comprehensive grammatical function and the most exuberant vitality, “I” surely has a significantly impact on its symmetrical pronoun ER(尔), thus promotes the rapid expansion of ER(尔).

3.3 Psychological Demands and Psychological Acceptance of Emotional Expression

RU(汝) and ER(尔) have some differences on the emotional expression. RU(汝) mainly expresses a respectful tone, while ER(尔) is mostly used in modest

or affectionate context. Compared with RU(汝), ER(尔) is better in meeting people’s psychological demands, and more likely to be accepted.

In a word, the second personal pronoun RU(汝) and ER(尔) play an important role in the personal pronoun system of ancient Chinese. The historical replacement between RU(汝) and ER(尔) is also the process of natural selection and superiority of the fittest in the internal elements of the Chinese language system. By sorting out the historical replacement of RU(汝) & ER(尔), we will have a clear understanding of the historical sequence of the personal pronoun system in ancient Chinese, which is beneficial to the research of the Chinese language history, so it is worthy of studying.

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