Literature, Language and Cultural Studies
ISSN Print: 3079-5095
ISSN Online: 3079-5109
https://doi.org/10.63313/LLCS.9176

Exploration into the Semantic Evolution of the Word "Zhong" in Henan Dialect and Chinese Traditional Thinking Patterns

Xiaoxin Mao[1,2], Guatpeng Ngoi[1,*]
[1]Department of Languages and Communication, Sultan Idris Education University(UPSI), Perak, 35900, Malaysia.
[2]Henan University of Engineering, Zhengzhou, Henan, 451191, China.
Email: gpngoi@fbk.upsi.edu.my

How to cite this paper: Mao, X., & Ngoi, G. (2026). Exploration into the semantic evolution of the word "Zhong" in Henan dialect and Chinese traditional thinking patterns. Literature, Language and Cultural Studies, 5(3), 88–93. ISSN Print: 3079-5095; ISSN Online: 3079-5109.
https://doi.org/10.63313/LLCS.9176
Published: 2026-06-22

Copyright © 2026 by author(s) and Erytis Publishing Limited.
This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).
http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

Abstract

"Zhong" is the most iconic core vocabulary in Henan dialect, serving multiple functions such as daily response, value judgment, and cultural symbol. This paper examines the usage of the character "Zhong" from oracle bone inscriptions of the Shang Dynasty to literature of the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties from a diachronic perspective, verifies the origin and inheritance of its meanings of "possible, feasible, and appropriate", and combines the Central Plains elegant language and the linguistic history view of "one source, three capitals" to reveal the intrinsic connection between the Henan dialect "Zhong" and the Chinese "advocating the middle" and "harmony" thinking. The study finds that the dialect usage of "Zhong" is rooted in the core location of Central Plains culture, and its semantic evolution is highly isomorphic with China's traditional worldview, outlook on life, aesthetic, and ethical pursuits. It is a typical example of regional dialects carrying the genes of Chinese culture.

Keywords

Henan dialect; "Zhong"; semantic evolution; Central Plains culture; Zhong-oriented thinking; Zhonghe philosophy

1. Introduction

The widespread use of words such as "Zhonghua", "Zhongyuan","Zhonghe", "Traditional Chinese Medicine", and "Zhongzhou" that are composed of "Zhong" has made "Shangzhong" a core value of Chinese culture and a basic way of thinking for the Chinese nation to understand the world. As the main root and vein of Chinese culture, Henan's dialect system is deeply influenced by the "Zhong" culture, and "Zhong" has become the symbol that best represents the regional language and cultural temperament of Henan. Existing research mostly focuses on the oral usage of the dialect 'Zhong', with little systematic explanation of its historical origins and cultural thinking. Based on literature review, this article sorts out the evolution of

the meaning of "zhong" and explains the traditional Chinese thinking mode behind it, providing reference for the study of dialect culture and the inheritance of Central Plains culture.

2. The usage and diachronic origins ofthe Henan dialect word "zhōng"

2.1. Basic usage of the Henan dialect word "zhōng"

In modern Henan dialect, "zhōng" mainly indicates "good", "ok", "successful", "capable", and "possible", serving as a typical affirmative response word; "bù zhōng" indicates negation; "zhōng bù zhōng" is used for inquiry, forming a complete oral response system. This usage is concise, frequent, and highly recognizable, becoming a hallmark of Henan regional language.

2.2. The evolution of the usage of tThe Ranuo Usage of "Zhong" in Oracle Bone Script Period

The use of 'Zhong' to indicate agreement and feasibility can be traced back to the oracle bone inscriptions of the Yin and Shang dynasties. Henan is the core area of the Yin and Shang dynasties, and there have been cases in oracle bone inscriptions where "middle" is used to indicate that the divination results are "feasible and appropriate":

"Ji Zongmao, Zhong." (from "Jia Gu Wen He Ji" 34061) (The oracle bone inscriptions inquire whether the sacrifice killed in the ancestral temple at dawn is successful or not.)

Gengshen Zhen, Wang Ling □, Zhong. (Oracle Bone Inscriptions Collection 32846) (Zhen divines and inquires, asking whether Wang Ling's name □ is successful or not, whether it is feasible or not.)

There are also some very short divination questions in oracle bone inscriptions, such as:

"Weak Middle "(Oracle Bone Script Collection 40797);

"Bu Zhong" (from "Jia Gu Wen He Ji," entry 35246);

"Among them" (from "Jia Gu Wen He Ji" 31963); (both refer to the meaning of asking whether something is feasible or not.)

2.3. The Common Usage of "Zhong" in Pre Qin Literature

The pre Qin "Yayan" was based on the Henan dialect of the Central Plains, and the usage of "Zhong" to indicate "appropriate, feasible, and suitable" is widely seen in Confucian classics.If rites and music are not flourishing, punishments will not be moderate; if punishments are not moderate, the people will be at a loss. (From "Zilu" in the Analects of Confucius) (If punishments are not moderate, it means they are not good, not feasible, and not appropriate.)Those who are upright cannot nurture those who are not, and those who are talented cannot nurture those who are not. (From

"Mencius·Li Lou") (Those who are good, upright, and moderate nurture those whose words and deeds are not moderate.)

However, without ability and integrity, the people will resent him internally, and the vassal states will rebel against him externally. (Xunzi, Zheng Lun) (Lack of talent is not acceptable.) It can be seen that 'Zhong' had already entered the common language in the pre Qin period, with both value judgment and behavioral evaluation functions.

2.4. Han Wei to Tang Song: "Zhong" entered the official and common language system

From the Xia, Shang, Zhou dynasties, through the Qin and Han dynasties, to the Wei and Jin dynasties, and then to the Sui and Tang dynasties, and finally to the Song dynasty, the Central Plains region of Henan has always been the center of politics, economy, and culture in China. Henan dialect has also become the common language in ancient times for a long period of time. He Jiuying (2007) summarized the status of Henan dialect in the history of Chinese language:

The term "one source" refers to the common historical origin of Mandarin Chinese across different periods. This source is the refined language formed in the Heluo region in ancient times, which is the earliest Mandarin Chinese we can trace back to. "Three capitals" refers to Luoyang, Nanjing, and Beijing. The Mandarin Chinese spoken in Nanjing and Beijing originated from two periods ofthe Northern and Southern Dynasties. During the first period, Mandarin Chinese spoken in Luoyang spread southward to form the Mandarin Chinese spoken in Nanjing. During the second period (Liao and Northern Song Dynasties, Jin and Southern Song Dynasties), Mandarin Chinese spoken in Luoyang spread northward to form the Mandarin Chinese spoken in Beijing.

Mr. He Jiuying's viewpoint of "one source and three capitals" appropriately summarizes the important position of Henan dialect in the history of Chinese language development. There is no shortage of usage of the Henan dialect word 'Zhong' in historical documents.

It's better to return to the fields than to have no officials. (From Lu Bao's "Qian Shen Shi") (There is no suitable person in the court to rely on, but in the middle, suitable, suitable. Lu Bao was from Nanyang in the Western Jin Dynasty)

"I am not willing to serve under a lesser official than the one I am currently serving under." (From "Zuo Zhuan·The Second Year of Cheng Gong") Du Yu, a scholar of the Wei and Jin dynasties, annotated: "I am not willing to serve under someone who is not as capable as the one I am currently serving under.".

Ifhe is useless, he should withdraw voluntarily and not hinder the capable for long. (From "The Biography ofWang Zun" in the "Book of Han") (Not being able to do something means being unable, incapable, or incompetent.)

The beautiful woman stops playing her jade-like fingers, and the sound of the

zither is no longer heard. (Wang Jian, "Jingnan Gifts to Li Zhaozuo, Transformed Rhyme Poem") (Note from Zhang Xiang's "Poetry, Ci, and Qu Glossary Explanation" (Volume 4): "Zhong" means to endure, to fit together, or to go; "Bu Zhong" means not to endure, not to fit together, or not to be good.)

The capital city of the Northern Song Dynasty was Kaifeng in Henan, which further consolidated the status of Henan as a cultural center. The Henan dialect officially became the lingua franca during the Northern Song Dynasty, known as the "Elegant Sound of the Central Plains".

Therefore, when a scholar-official requested a dispatch, if he received the word 'Zhong', there was no reason for him not to get it. However, when Cai Jing was the chancellor and wanted to gain reputation, whenever there was a request for something, he would write the word 'Zhong' to people in person. Everyone was delighted and praised him, but there were differences between the regular script, cursive script, and cursive cursive script. The court officials secretly understood his intention, and the gains and losses were delayed, which went without saying. When Wang Fu took office, he followed this practice of writing the word 'Zhong', and if someone did not agree, he would add a stroke to make it 'Shen'. (Zhuang Chuo's 'Ji Lei Bian' in the Song Dynasty) (Cai Jing and Wang Fu approved the word 'Zhong' in official documents, indicating approval and consent.)

The Inheritance of "Zhong" in 2.5 Yuan Ming Qing Folk Literature Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasty operas and novels fully inherit the oral usage of "zhong":

"If it's appropriate to say something, say it; if not, don't say it." (Guan Hanqing, "Lady Liu Celebrates the Five Nobles")

"But is it a good omen or not?" - Bu'er (Guan Hanqing's "The Second Act of Saving the Wind and Dust")

I was just about to discuss with my sister and brother-in-law about going to the mansion to beg for it, but is that really the way to go? ("Two-O'Clock Pai An Jing Qi")

Although there is a jade, he is not a valuable item here. Even if we subdue him,he will be useless. The eldest lady is like a Buddha, but she is also useless. The second daughter is even more useless, and she is not from this household. (Chapter 55 of "Dream of the Red Chamber")

Whether one succeeds or fails, it's all in the hands of fate. Don't take the back door! (Chapter 15 of "The Legend of Heroic Sons and Daughters")

In summary, the use of "zhong", which represents the meaning of "ranuo", has been used not only in literary literature in Henan Province, but also in literary literature outside Henan Province, from the Yin and Shang dynasties of oracle bone inscriptions to modern and contemporary literature. It has appeared not only in popular literature, but also in orthodox literature such as poetry. The expression of 'Zhong' and the ideology of 'Zhong' have been deeply embedded in the entire Chinese culture, influencing the Chinese way of thinking.

3. The traditional Chinese thinking mode carried by "Zhong"

3.1. The Original Meaning and Cultural Extension of the Character 'Zhong'

The oracle bone script of "Zhong" is a pictographic character, such as a flagpole standing in the center with banners and streamers above and below. Its original meaning was a flag, but later it was extended to refer to the center, with "Zhong" in the left, middle, right, and east, west, north, and south. The concept of 'center', which neither leans towards the left nor the right, represents a Chinese worldview of orientation and a corresponding outlook on life: objectivity, fairness, appropriateness, and harmony.

3.2. Embodiment of "moderation" thinking in life and culture

Every aspect of Chinese life aims to achieve objectivity, fairness, and appropriateness, with harmony and balance in all aspects. For instance, in terms of diet, Chinese people emphasize the balance between cold and heat, with cold-natured individuals consuming warm-natured foods and hot-natured individuals consuming cool-natured foods, in order to achieve the harmonious balance of "zhong" (the golden mean), which is also the essence of Chinese traditional medicine culture. In naming, the pursuit of "zhong" balance is also evident. For example, Han Yu, whose courtesy name was Tuizhi, was named after the character for "retreat"; if there was a lack of water in his name, he would be given a name with a water radical. In terms of aesthetics, most Chinese architecture emphasizes symmetry, with "zhong" as the axis to achieve symmetry. This is most prominent in ancient Chinese palaces, such as the palaces at the Erlitou site of the Heluo Cultural Center, the Xianyang Palace of the Qin Dynasty, and the Forbidden City. Chinese people emphasize self-cultivation, and the norms for self-cultivation are "zhong": "Confucius was gentle, kind, courteous, frugal, and magnanimous." It means being gentle, kind, courteous, frugal, honest, and magnanimous, just like Confucius. They not only pursue harmony and amity among individuals but also promote "zhong" in ethnic relations, pursuing harmony and friendliness. The Doctrine of the Mean states, "To appreciate virtue and be modest about one's abilities is the way to win over others with gentleness."

3.3. "Zhong": The Unification of Dialect Words and National Thinking

The Henan dialect word "zhong" is not just a colloquial term, but also a linguistic carrier of cultural genes. It transforms abstract philosophies such as "upholding the mean," "harmony," "correctness," and "moderation" into perceptible and usable language forms in daily life, achieving the unity of philosophical thinking and dialectal life.

4. Conclusion

"Zhong" is a hallmark word in Henan dialect, and its usage as "feasible, appropriate, and agreeable" can be traced back to the oracle bone inscriptions of the Shang Dynasty. It has evolved through the refined language of the pre-Qin period, the common language of the Han and Wei dynasties, the official language of the Tang and Song dynasties, and the popular literature of the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, maintaining a consistent tradition. As the core area of Central Plains culture and the birthplace of ancient common language, Henan makes "Zhong" both dialectal and universal. From a linguistic perspective, "Zhong" is a living fossil of the diachronic evolution of Chinese; from a cultural perspective, "Zhong" embodies the traditional Chinese thinking mode of advocating the middle, being upright, achieving harmony, and striving for balance, serving as a typical case of regional dialects carrying the core of Chinese culture. The study of "Zhong" can not only provide a paradigm for dialect vocabulary research but also help elucidate the root status of Central Plains culture in Chinese civilization.

References

[1] He Jiuying. *Three Essays on Chinese* [M]. Beijing: Language and Literature Press, 2007

[2] He Jiuying. *The Cultural Study of Chinese Characters* [M]. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2016

[3] Guo Moruo, et al. *Oracle Bone Inscriptions Collection* [M]. Hangzhou: Zhejiang People's Fine Arts Publishing House, 1999

[4] Qiu Xigui. *An Outline of Philology* [M]. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1988

[5] Wang Ning. *An Introduction to Chinese Character Formation* [M]. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2015

[6] Wang Lijun. *Cultural Interpretation of Chinese Characters* [M]. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2012

[7] Xu Shunzhan. *Ancient Culture of the Central Plains* [M]. Zhengzhou: Henan People's Publishing House, 1983

[8] Wang Yunzhi. *Zhongyuan Cultural Encyclopedia - Cultural Relics Encyclopedia - Ancient Scripts* [M]. Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou Ancient Books Publishing House, 2008

[9] Tang Lan. Introduction to Paleography [M]. Jinan: Qilu Bookstore,1981

[10] Huang Dekuan, *Chen Bingxin. History of Chinese Philology* [M]. Hefei: Anhui Education Press, 2014

[11] Zhang Qingxia. Research on the Protection and Inheritance of Central Plains Regional Culture in the Context of the Belt and Road Initiative [J]. *Green and Eco-friendly Building Materials*, 2016 (12): 234-235

[12] Mao Wenbin, Han Bingjie. Preservation of Architectural Landscape in Historical Districts Influenced by Central Plains Regional Culture [J]. *Art and Times*, 2023 (02)

[13] Li Li. Research on the inheritance and dissemination of Central Plains culture in the new era [J]. *The Voice of the Yellow River*, 2019 (08)

[14] Zhan Qixian, Du Suxia. The Theory of Chinese Character Generation in Zhang Huaiguan's Calligraphy Theory [J]. *Chinese Character Culture*, 2019 (19)