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The Connection Between the Language Characteristics of Characters in Records of the Grand Historian and Their Personalities—Taking "the Four Noblemen of the Warring States Period" and "the Figures of the Early Han Dynasty" as Examples

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Abstract. As China's first biographical general history, Records of the Grand Historian features character languages that embody both historical and literary values. However, existing studies have paid insufficient attention to the comparative analysis of the languages used by figures from the Warring States Period and the early Han Dynasty it. Therefore, this study takes the Four Noblemen of the Warring States Period and Xiao He, Fan Kuai, and Zhou Bo from the early Han Dynasty in Records of the Grand Historian as the research objects. It sorts out the linguistic characteristics of these characters based on vocabulary, sentence patterns, and styles, and conducts a comparative analysis by combining their personalities with the historical backgrounds of the Warring States Period and the early Han Dynasty, to explore the differences in their languages and the causes behind them. The language of the Four Noblemen of the Warring States Period revolves around their noble status and political demands, embodying both utilitarianism and strategic thinking, while also containing the contradiction between modesty and arrogance. In contrast, the language of figures in the early Han Dynasty was consistent with their own role positioning. Due to the strengthening of monarchical centralization and the governance demand for recuperation and rest, their language showed characteristics of being cautious and balanced, or simple. The differences in characters' language are not only the external projection of their personality traits, but also the linguistic mirror of the styles of different eras.

Keywords: Records of the Grand Historian, language, era, personality

1. Introduction

Records of the Grand Historian, written by Sima Qian in the Western Han Dynasty and also known as Taishigong Shu, is China's first biographical general history [1]. It consists of 130 chapters, divided into 12 Basic Annals, 30 Hereditary Houses, 70 Biographies, 10 Tables, and 8 Treatises. It records nearly 3,000 years of history from the period of Emperor Huang in ancient times to the first year of the Taichu era of Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty. Records of the Grand Historian not only

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holds a pivotal position in the development of Chinese historiography, but also has exerted a profound influence on the research of literature and linguistics.

Ancient scholars' research on Records of the Grand Historian mainly focused on collation and annotation. For example, during the Northern Song Dynasty, the “Three Commentaries” were included under the main text of Records of the Grand Historian and compiled into a single volume. In the Ming Dynasty, Ling Zhilong extensively collected comments from various scholars and compiled Shiji Zuan (Compilation of Records of the Grand Historian), which became the base text for modern collation.

Modern scholars' research on Records of the Grand Historian is more comprehensive. Scholars such as Zhang Dake, An Pingqiu, and Yu Zhanghua edited A Comprehensive Collection of Research on Records of the Grand Historian (2005), which systematically compiled the research results on Records of the Grand Historian over more than 2,000 years since its publication. Thus, a relatively complete system for the study of Records of the Grand Historian has been formed. In addition, Han Zhaoqi took the lead in offering specialized courses related to Records of the Grand Historian in domestic universities. In recent years, researchers have delved not only into the literary characteristics of Records of the Grand Historian, such as its writing and narration, as well as its linguistic aspects, including figures of speech like metaphors, passive sentences, and function words. They have also linked Records of the Grand Historian with other materials such as Strategies of the Warring States and Book of Han, dynamically analyzing cultural and linguistic changes.

This paper starts with aspects such as vocabulary, sentence - pattern features, and styles to sort out the language characteristics of different characters, and summarizes their possible common features, such as the noble and ritual - education characteristics of the Four Gentlemen of the Warring States. In addition, this study will also analyze the status and occupational characteristics of characters through their personalized language [2]. Personalized character language makes the characters more full - bodied and three - dimensional. It fully showcases the individuality of the characters and presents their typical character traits [3].

This paper compares the characters from the Warring States period and the Han Dynasty in Records of the Grand Historian, making up for the deficiencies in relevant existing research. The comparative study more effectively reveals the differences in the speech, behavior, and concepts of characters under different historical backgrounds, providing a new perspective for related research.

2. The language and characteristic features of “the Four Lords of the Warring States”

The Four Lords of the Warring States were four noble and high-ranking officials in the late Warring States period, renowned for “hosting retainers”. Among them, Lord Mengchang, Tian Wen, was a member of the Qi state’s royal family. He inherited the fiefdom of Xueyi and once served as the prime minister of the Qi state. He was famous for recruiting three thousand retainers. Relying on the efforts of his retainers, he maneuvered among various states and was one of the core figures in the noble politics of the Qi state. Lord Chunshen, Huang Xie, although not from the royal clan of the Chu state, was granted the title of Lord Chunshen due to his outstanding strategies. He served as the prime minister of the Chu state for more than twenty years, holding both military and political power. He once united the vassal states to resist the Qin state and was a key official supporting the late - stage regime of the Chu state. Lord Pingyuan, Zhao Sheng, was a member of the Zhao state's royal family and the son of King Wuling of Zhao. He served as the prime minister of the Zhao state several times and was well - known for treating worthy scholars with courtesy. During major crises in the Zhao state, such as the Siege of Handan, he resolved the difficulties by contacting the vassal states and employing talented people like Mao Sui. He was a representative of the noble group in the

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Zhao state. Lord Xinling, Wei Wuji, was a member of the imperial clan of the Wei State. Because of his virtue and ability, he enjoyed deep support from the people. Once “stole the military tally to save Zhao” to repel the Qin army and launched a joint attack on the Qin state by forming a vertical alliance of five states, he was a highly influential noble of the imperial clan in the Wei state during the late Warring States period.

In the late Warring States period, when they lived, the Zhou royal court existed in name only politically, and the struggle for hegemony among the seven states intensified. In order to ensure their own survival or strive for hegemony, the six states had to rely on noble ministers to recruit talents and ally with other vassal states, which provided room for the political activities of the four princes. At the social level, the breakdown of the system of rites and music became more profound. The hereditary system of the old nobility became loose. The shi class, by virtue of their talents, became a crucial tool for governing the country that was contended for by various states. In this context, supporting shi (scholars) became an important way for nobles to demonstrate their strength and reserve talents. In terms of ideology, the contention of a hundred schools of thought entered its later stage. Ideologies such as Legalism and the School of Diplomacy intertwined. Lobbying and debating became important means of influencing political decisions. This also shaped the four princes’ way of doing things, characterized by their adept use of strategies and emphasis on eloquence, and made their language more utilitarian and persuasive to meet the needs of the struggle for hegemony.

2.1. Lord Mengchang, Tian Wen

Tian Wen's language was very flexible. It adjusted according to the communication partners and the situation. When facing his retainers, he conveyed trust and entrustment with the words "I have three thousand retainers, so I borrowed money in Xue. "However, he would also directly question Feng Huan upon learning that the latter had burned the bond deeds, asking, “I heard that after you got the money, you immediately bought a large amount of beef, wine, and then burned the bond deeds. Why?” [1]. When lobbying Wei Ran, the prime minister of the State of Qin, he closely addressed the other party's need for power and influence. He started his persuasion by contrasting the pros and cons of “Qin and Jin making you an important and respected figure” with “you will surely end up in great distress”. His words were precise and highly targeted [1]. When his guests were deserting him, he vented his indignation by saying, “I will surely spit in their faces and humiliate them severely.” but after being persuaded by Feng Huan, he was able to show his humility by saying, “How dare I not follow your instruction?”

In terms of character, Tian Wen was hospitable and fond of befriending scholars, yet he was also self - interested and short - sighted. He exhausted his family fortune to treat his retainers with courtesy and take care of their families, which demonstrated his emphasis on talent. After listening to Feng Huan's persuasion, he “bowed twice to express his gratitude for the advice”, revealing his magnanimity to accept advice and correct his mistakes. However, he lobbied the powerful and influential for personal gain, undermining the national interests, thus revealing his self - serving nature. He carried out a large - scale massacre just because of the mockery from the people of the State of Zhao, which shows that he was devoid of morality. It also reveals the aristocrats' contempt for human lives [4]. His questioning of Feng Huan and his failure to distinguish the worthy from the unworthy among his retainers further highlight his irascibility and shortsightedness, creating an image of a hypocritical and self - serving noble.

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2.2. Lord Chunshen, Huang Xie

Huang Xie's language was characterized by meticulous logic. When persuading King Zhao of Qin not to attack the State of Chu, he pointed out the drawbacks of the conflict between the States of Qin and Chu by using the metaphor of “two tigers fighting each other”. He cited famous lines from Shi and Yi, as well as the historical facts of the destruction of the Zhi family and the State of Wu. He analyzed the principle of “when things reach their extreme, they will reverse”. He also detailed the tragic situations of the common people in the States of Han and Wei who were persecuted by Qin. He expounded the argument that “as long as the States of Han and Wei do not perish, they will remain a threat to the state of Qin”, presenting his case in a progressive and highly persuasive manner [1]. When formulating a plan for the Crown Prince of Chu to return to the State of Chu, he directly pointed out the crisis by saying, “The crown prince will not be able to succeed to the throne and preside over the ancestral sacrifices”, and put forward the strategy of “I volunteer to stay behind and face death for this matter.” Afterwards, when confessing to King Zhao of Qin, he said, “I, Xie, deserve to die. I hope Your Majesty will grant me death”, fully demonstrating his sense of responsibility [1].

His character changed over time. In the early stage, relying on his accurate insight into the situation, he demonstrated outstanding strategies and political foresight through his words, and accumulated political capital for himself. In the later stage, however, due to his eagerness for power and position, he gradually became “blinded by greed”. His excessive self - confidence made it difficult for him to accept honest advice. He turned a deaf ear to Zhu Ying's admonition. Ultimately, he lost his life because he overlooked Li Yuan's conspiracy. This corroborates Sima Qian's comment that “in the end, he was controlled by Li Yuan; what a pity!” [1].

2.3. Lord Pingyuan, Zhao Sheng

Zhao Sheng's act of hosting retainers was merely a showy pretense, and he had great difficulty in discerning the worthy from the unworthy. When Mao Sui recommended himself, he looked down upon Mao Sui by saying “None of my attendants have ever spoken of you, nor have I heard of you” [1,5]. After Mao Sui successfully concluded the Vertical Alliance and returned, Zhao Sheng expressed his admiration and admitted his fault by saying, “I dare not claim to be able to judge people any longer”, showing his sense of reason [1]. He was loyal to the State of Zhao, and actively made efforts to relieve the siege of Handan. When seeking help from the Lord of Wei, taking the in-law relationship as a bond, he skillfully combined family affection with morality, making his words more emotionally appealing and morally binding. However, when commenting on the Lord of Wei's association with people from the lower classes, he bluntly said, “The Lord is a reckless person.” This straightforwardly revealed the aristocrat's disdain for the lower - class people. All these behaviors shaped his image as a loyal yet arrogant noble.

2.4. Lord Xinling, Wei Wuji

Wei Wuji's language style was steady, decisive, sincere and straightforward, which fully demonstrated the demeanor of a worthy nobleman. When the King of Wei was flustered due to the flames of war in Zhao's territory, he responded with certainty, “The King of Zhao is just out hunting, not launching an invasion.” After that, he briefly explained the reason, saying “One of my retainers is capable of getting detailed information about the secret affairs of the King of Zhao.” His tone was calm yet full of confidence [1]. When taking command of Jin Bi's army, he issued an order: “If both

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father and son are in the army, the father shall return home; if both brothers are in the army, the elder brother shall return home; if a man is the only son without brothers, he shall return home to take care of his parents [1].".The language was plain but full of solicitude for the soldiers. When evaluating Lord Pingyuan's way of hosting retainers, he straightforwardly said, "Now Lord Pingyuan regards this as a shame, and he is not worthy of associating with [1]." He frankly expressed his disdain for Zhao Sheng.

Wei Wuji was virtuous, wise, and valued both friendship and righteousness. He relied on the resources of his retainers and his own insight and was always able to accurately judge the situation. The calmness in his words stemmed from his control over the overall situation, and it also made it inevitable that "the King of Wei feared the virtue and ability of Lord Wei". His kindness in showing solicitude for soldiers and his cherishing of true talents made his words free from the arrogance of the nobility and free from false embellishments. This was in sharp contrast to Lord Pingyuan, and ultimately he became a responsible and virtuous man.

3. The linguistic characteristics of figures in the early Han Dynasty

The figures in the early Han Dynasty were important officials who assisted Liu Bang in establishing the Han Dynasty. They had different identities and functions with their respective focuses. Xiao He was a core strategist of Liu Bang. Born as a minor official at the end of the Qin Dynasty, he served as the prime minister in the early Han Dynasty, presided over the formulation of laws and regulations, and managed the Guanzhong region. He provided logistical and institutional support for the stability of the Han Dynasty's regime and was a representative of the civil officials in the early Han Dynasty. Fan Kuai, in his early years, made a living by butchering dogs. He joined Liu Bang in starting the uprising and was brave and skilled in battle. During the Hongmen Banquet, he risked his life to protect his lord. In the early Han Dynasty, he was enfeoffed as Marquis of Wuyang and led troops on many occasions to quell rebellions. He was a military general trusted by Liu Bang. Zhou Bo was born into a common family, whose occupations included weaving bamboo curtains and playing the flute at funerals. He fought alongside Liu Bang, was conferred the title of Marquis of Jiang for his military achievements. In the early Han Dynasty, he participated in suppressing the chaos of the Lü Clan and supporting the enthronement of Emperor Wen of Han. He combined the bravery of a military general with political decision - making ability, and was a crucial force in maintaining the stability of the Han Dynasty. These two generals were "upright, tough, straightforward, tenacious in will, and had eventful fates [6]."

The political rule under the guidance of Huang - Lao ideology, due to the lack of reasonable control over local forces, led to the fief - state forces and powerful landlord forces posing a threat to imperial power. Moreover, Liu Bang's suspicion of his meritorious officials exacerbated the complexity of the political environment [7]. At the social level, the population sharply decreased and the economy was in a state of depression. The common people were in urgent need of recuperation and rehabilitation. Restoring production became the core need for the stability of the regime. In terms of governance strategies, the Han Dynasty abandoned the harsh laws and severe punishments of the Qin Dynasty. It shifted towards the "Huang - Lao doctrine of inaction" and let the people recuperate. At the same time, it strengthened the centralization of imperial power to consolidate the rule.

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3.1. Xiao He

Xiao He's language was always cautious, steady, and full of far - reaching plans. Every sentence was in line with the status of a court official and the requirements of the situation. When petitioning for the imperial garden to be given to the people, he based his argument on the fact that “there is a lot of vacant land in the Shanglin Garden.” He gently put forward the suggestion of “hoping to allow the people to enter and cultivate the land, and not to collect the straw for the animals to eat [1].” This not only showed concern for the livelihood of the people but also avoided offending Liu Bang. When Emperor Xiaohui inquired about the candidate for prime minister, he first responded euphemistically with “no one knows a subject better than the ruler.” He didn't make a hasty recommendation. When Emperor Xiaohui mentioned Cao Shen, he immediately kowtowed and said straightforwardly, “Your Majesty has found the right person! I will have no regrets even if I die [1].” This showed both respect for the monarch and a focus on the overall situation.

As a core advisor to Liu Bang, Xiao He was steady and loyal. He was well aware of Liu Bang's sensitivity to power and popular sentiment. Therefore, he put forward his suggestions in plain and gentle language. This not only brought benefits to the common people but also defused the potential suspicion from the monarch. It fully demonstrated his meticulousness in handling affairs. Even though he was trembling with fear under Liu Bang's suspicion, he still always put the foundation of the Han Dynasty first. He set aside his personal grudge against Cao Shen and recommended him. The modesty and candor in his words are a direct manifestation of his character of being loyal to the monarch and patriotic. He became a prudent and reliable prime minister assisting in government affairs in the early Han Dynasty.

3.2. Fan Kuai

Fan Kuai’s language was characterized by its straightforwardness, roughness, and a strong sense of power. There was not the slightest bit of the euphemistic embellishment typical of literati. At the Hongmen Banquet, facing Xiang Yu, he bluntly said, “I do not even shrink from death. Why would I refuse a cup of wine?” He showed his determination to protect his master through a strong rhetorical question. Subsequently, he stated the fact that Duke Pei “was waiting for Your Majesty”. He pointed out the inappropriateness of Xiang Yu “listening to the words of villains”. Finally, he warned of the consequences with the words “I’m afraid the whole country will be divided, and people will doubt Your Majesty”, and every sentence hit the nail on the head. When admonishing Liu Bang who was ill, he shed tears and sighed, “How magnificent he was!""and “How exhausted he has become.” which pointed out the problem by comparing the present with the past. Then he used the rhetorical question “Doesn't Your Majesty remember what happened to Zhao Gao?” to issue a warning. His fearlessness enabled Fan Kuai to speak frankly in the face of Xiang Yu's majesty. His loyalty and lack of self - concern made him always keep the safety of Liu Bang and the Han Dynasty in mind. His straightforwardness made him disdain to express things in a veiled way. When encountering problems, he would point them out directly [8]. This unadorned way of speaking that gets straight to the point perfectly matches the image of a military general from a humble background like him.

3.3. Zhou Bo

Zhou Bo's language was somewhat similar to that of Fan Kuai. It was equally plain and straightforward, fully demonstrating the true qualities of a military general. When facing scholars and rhetoricians, he directly commanded them with “Hurry up and tell me” [1]. His words were

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short and abrupt, without any polite greetings or small talk. It straightforwardly conveyed his need to get straight to the point. After being released from prison, he sighed, “I have led an army of millions, but how could I have known the power of prison officials?” [1]. The words were as plain as an ordinary chat. He neither boasted about his past military achievements nor complained about fate or blamed others. He simply expressed his genuine perception of reality. This kind of language enabled him to break away from the single - dimensional label of a rough military general and become a simple, steady, and seasoned senior official in the early Han Dynasty, polished by the vicissitudes of life.

4. The influence of the times on language

The social backgrounds of the Warring States period and the early Han Dynasty were different. Consequently, it shaped the language characteristics of different groups. This made these language characteristics a linguistic mirror reflecting the features of their respective eras. The Warring States period was in a great transformative stage of the collapse of the etiquette and music system. The vassal states engaged in long - term wars to compete for land, population and hegemony. The hereditary system of the old aristocracy became loose. The literati class broke free from the shackles of their status by virtue of their knowledge, strategies or martial arts skills. They became precious assets that the monarchs of various states vied to recruit. The “contention of a hundred schools of thought” was not only a clash of ideas, it also gave rise to various language paradigms suitable for lobbying, debating and admonishing. The strategists in the Warring States period made a living by formulating strategies, and lobbying was an effective way for them to promote their strategies [9].

These backgrounds jointly forged the language of the Four Lords of the Warring States into one with utilitarianism and strategicalness. As the core force of the aristocratic politics, the Four Lords of the Warring States needed to strive for talents and lobby the vassal states through language to achieve their political goals. In order to consolidate his power, Lord Mengchang adjusted his language flexibly according to different targets to win over retainers and persuade the powerful. Lord Chunshen and Lord Xinling analyzed the situation and resolved crises with well - reasoned words in order to safeguard national interests or their own political status. The words of Lord Pingyuan also revolved around practical needs.

The mobility of the shi class throws the language of the Four Lords into a contradiction of co-existing humility and arrogance. On the one hand, there is the reality that those who win the support of the shi (the literati and knights - errant in ancient China) become powerful, while those who lose it become weak forced them to try to win over talents. But on the other hand, their deeply - rooted noble status made it difficult for them to truly get rid of class prejudices. This kind of arrogance would inadvertently reveal itself in their language. For example, Lord Mengchang's interrogation of his retainers, and Lord Pingyuan's contempt for Mao Sui. This kind of contradiction is not a personal character flaw of the Four Lords. Instead, it is an inevitable result of the collision between the status of the old aristocrats and the demands of the new shi class during the Warring States Period. They needed to be humble to win the support of the shi scholars and yet they could hardly completely shed their arrogant aristocratic nature. Ultimately, their language became a vivid carrier of the contradictions of that era.

In the early days of the Han Dynasty, it was at the initial stage of the establishment of a unified regime. The centralized power of the monarchy was gradually strengthened. The political environment became more complex. This was not simply a matter of power centralization. The remaining forces of the old aristocracy had not been eliminated. Rebellions by kings of different surnames occurred frequently. Liu Bang's suspicion of his meritorious officials was like a sword

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hanging over their heads. This atmosphere, which seemed stable on the surface but was actually full of undercurrents directly determined that the language of high - ranking officials in the early Han Dynasty had to find a precise balance between showing loyalty and avoiding disasters. As a prime minister assisting in governance, Xiao He had to balance the tasks of seeking benefits for the people and serving the emperor under Liu Bang's suspicion. Therefore, his language was always gentle, calm and steady [10]. Military generals such as Fan Kuai and Zhou Bo, although retaining the straightforwardness of their humble origins, still had to make their language conform to the ethics of the monarch - subject relationship. For example, when Fan Kuai admonished Liu Bang, although he was straightforward he still addressed Liu Bang as “Your Majesty” out of respect and expressed his concern by “shedding tears” to avoid offending the imperial power. Zhou Bo's lament both concealed his understanding of the capriciousness of power and implied his awe of the monarch.

In addition, there was a need for a policy of recuperation and rehabilitation in the early Han Dynasty for national governance. This made Xiao He's language show more concern for the livelihood of the people. This formed a sharp contrast with the language orientation centered around hegemony during the Warring States period. The language of the Four Lords of the Warring States Period no matter how full of strategies it was, ultimately, they all point to the hegemony - seeking goal of striving for benefits for the state and consolidating power for oneself (for example, his act of “stealing the military tally to rescue Zhao” was essentially to safeguard Wei's position in the Central Plains). However, in the early Han Dynasty, after the wars at the end of the Qin Dynasty the population had sharply declined and the economy was in a state of depression. Restoring production and stabilizing the people's minds became the foundation for the stability of imperial power. Therefore, in Xiao He's words, people's livelihood issues such as reducing taxes, encouraging farming and sericulture, and lightening corvée labor frequently emerged. When he reported to Liu Bang on the governance of Guanzhong, he didn't say “I have taken control of Guanzhong”, but “The population in Guanzhong has increased, and the common people are all content with their occupations.” He attributed the achievements of governance to the benevolence of the monarch and the peaceful living of the people. This not only conforms to the national policy of recuperation and rehabilitation, but also, with an image of having no political ambition, defuses Liu Bang's suspicion. This kind of linguistic logic, which takes people’s livelihood as the foundation and achieves the dual goals of pacifying the people and consolidating the monarch's power, is precisely the profound shaping of language in the Han Dynasty. It completely breaks away from the language inertia centered around war and power - seeking tactics in the Warring States period.

5. Conclusion

This paper, through the analysis of the languages of the Four Lords of the Warring States period and the figures in the early Han Dynasty demonstrates that language is a dual projection of character and the era. The language style of a figure directly reflects his or her character traits: Tian Wen's flexible language corresponds to his self - interested and fickle character. Wei Wuji's steady language demonstrates his virtue, ability and wisdom. Xiao He's cautious language reflects his meticulousness and loyalty. The straightforward language of Fan Kuai and Zhou Bo is in line with their true nature as military generals. At the same time, language is also restricted by the historical background. The atmosphere of contending for hegemony during the Warring States period made the language full of strategies and utilitarianism. The centralized power environment in the early Han Dynasty added caution and awe to the language. The two factors jointly create vivid and three - dimensional character images.

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This paper breaks through the single - perspective study of the character language in Records of the Grand Historian. Taking the Four Lords of the Warring States Period and the figures in the early Han Dynasty as samples, this paper empirically proves that language is a dual projection of character and the era. It explore the dynamics and contradictions of the characters' language and provide a reusable framework and practical reference for relevant research.

Future research can take groups such as scholars and women in Records of the Grand Historian as research objects. Combine with documents such as Strategies of the Warring States to conduct cross - text comparisons. It is also possible to introduce methods from different disciplines such as psychology for analysis to expand the depth and breadth of the research.

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