

On the Maturation of Chinese Characters and the Mechanism behind the Contention of Hundred Schools of Thought

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Abstract

Academic circles hold diverse views on the causes of the “Contention of a Hundred Schools of Thought.” This paper proposes that the maturity, practical application and diffusion of Chinese characters during the Spring and Autumn Period substantially enhanced administrative governance and economic development, bringing the prefecture-county system to dominance. Populations whose intellectual horizons had long been confined to parochial local contexts, metaphorically “frogs at the bottom of a well,” achieved free circulation of information and talent across the Chinese-character cultural sphere. This unprecedented intellectual explosion furnished the necessary preconditions for the emergence, contestation and synthesis of ideas, thereby giving rise to the Contention of a Hundred Schools of Thought. The historical process and its underlying mechanism are non-replicable.

Keywords: contention of a hundred schools of thought, maturity of Chinese characters, information circulation, prefecture-county system, intellectual explosion

1. Introduction

During the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, numerous scholars emerged and a hundred schools of thought contended. The depth and breadth of their ideas not only laid the foundation for Chinese civilization over the subsequent more than two thousand years, but also shone brilliantly alongside the contemporary ancient Greek civilization. Regarding the causes of this cultural spectacle, traditional historiography mostly starts from changes in the external social environment: the decline of the Zhou royal house and the collapse of the rites-music

system (the disintegration of Zhou-dynasties social hierarchy, ritual and ceremonial institutions) created political space for intellectual emancipation; the popularization of iron-ware tools and ox-plowing brought a leap in productive forces, supporting more people who were not directly engaged in agricultural production and furnishing the material basis for the rise of the “scholar-official (shi)” stratum; the breakdown of the “learning was confined to government institutions” system and the rise of private schools directly broadened the scope of knowledge dissemination (Sun, 2019, p. 26).

Y. Li argues that the great cultural efflorescence of the Warring-States era was neither rootless nor groundless. Its origins stretch back to the remote Five-Emperors period. He contends that without this deep historical root, the splendid episode of the Contention of a Hundred Schools of Thought would never have occurred in human history (Y. Li, 2003, p. 108).

Several scholars focus on the displacement of the shi stratum and its connection to the hundred-schools movement. For instance, He observes that profound social upheaval unfolded from the late Western Zhou through the Spring-and-Autumn period. China’s old socio-economic order disintegrated, and the shi — lower-ranked aristocrats — were dislodged from formal political institutions. As educated individuals under existential pressure, the shi faced the imperative to seek new livelihoods. This circumstance compelled them, building upon inherited bodies of knowledge, to formulate competing arguments and practical solutions responsive to real-world conditions. Within the context of private schooling, they consolidated distinct intellectual standpoints, generating the Contention of a Hundred Schools of Thought and facilitating the axial-age breakthrough of Chinese thought (He, 2021, p. 110).

Some researchers have also analyzed and reflected on this issue from a regional perspective. For instance, Wen argues that it is undeniable that in the face of profound social changes, people from different classes and social strata, standing on different positions and thinking about problems from various angles, will inevitably form different viewpoints. The emergence of the Hundred Schools of Thought was closely related to the regional cultures with distinct cultural characteristics within China’s cultural sphere at that time. In this sense, the contention of a hundred schools of thought during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods largely reflected the conflicts and integration of diverse regional cultures within China’s cultural sphere (Wen, 1990, p. 8). His main examples cited are Confucianism and Taoism, with the former originating from the State of Lu in the north and the latter from the State of Chu in the south.

Xue insists that the Contention of a Hundred Schools of Thought represented both an exhibition of classical Chinese culture and a collision of competing Warring-States intellectual traditions whose shared textual resources derived from the Six Classics (Xue, 2015, p. 54). He cites the Qing-dynasty scholar Zhang Xuecheng to reinforce his argument: “All schools trace their origins to the Six Arts”; “Writings of the Warring-States period derive their source from the Six Arts” (Xue, 2015, p. 57).

Nevertheless, while each of these explanations holds merit and captures part of the truth, they fail to piece these fragments together into a complete picture. One core question remains: in China’s long history, social upheaval, economic transformation, and talent mobility were not

unique to the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. Why was it only during this era that such a large-scale and far-reaching intellectual emancipation movement emerged? This suggests that behind these visible factors, there must have been a more fundamental and decisive underlying cultural transformation. Activated at a specific historical juncture, it systematically drove the transformation of the entire social structure and cognitive model (Yu, 2014, p. 128).

This paper argues that this pivotal cultural variable lies in the maturity, practical deployment, and diffusion of Chinese characters. Far from serving merely as a passive cultural backdrop, it constituted a revolutionary techno-social event. By the Spring-and-Autumn and Warring-States periods, the Chinese writing system had attained full maturity, capable of encoding sophisticated philosophical arguments and administrative documentation (Qiu, 2013, pp. 57–64). The diffusion of writing dismantled barriers to information transmission, connecting countless isolated “cognitive islands” into an expansive intellectual continent. This fundamental transformation laid the indispensable groundwork for the emergence of the Contention of a Hundred Schools of Thought.

2. Cognitive Isolation and the Monopoly of Writing in the Shang and Western Zhou Dynasties

To understand the explosive emergence of the Hundred Schools of Thought, we must first examine the social conditions preceding it. The unified vision encapsulated in the traditional notion that “all land under heaven belongs to the king” is largely a construct imagined by later generations. Archaeological findings and documentary records together reveal that numerous states and regional polities existed across the realm during the Shang and Western Zhou dynasties. Later scholars characterize this situation as a fragmented landscape of “ten thousand states standing side by side.” This composite world order is extensively discussed in X. Li’s research on early civilizations (X. Li, 1997, p. 54).

Zuo Zhuan (“Duke Ai, Year 7”) records: “When Yu assembled feudal lords at Mount Tu, ten thousand states presented jade and silk as tribute.” *Lüshi Chunqiu* (“Employing the People”) likewise notes: “In Yu’s time there were ten thousand states under heaven; by the reign of Tang, only more than three thousand remained.” According to *Xunzi* (“Ru Xiao”), the Zhou enfeoffment established seventy-one states, among which fifty-three were ruled by royal Ji clansmen. *Shiji* (“Basic Annals of Zhou”) recounts that eight hundred feudal lords gathered unbidden at King Wu’s Mengjin alliance — this figure refers to allied participants, not the total number of enfeoffed polities. Most of these “states” were kin-based chiefdoms or city-states with small territories and sparse populations (Chen, 1969, pp. 1–5). Effective communication between them was minimal, echoing Laozi’s depiction: “Small states with sparse populations... neighboring states within sight, the crowing of cocks and barking of dogs within earshot, yet the people grow old and die without ever having dealings with one another.” Within such highly segregated conditions, human cognition was confined within narrow geographical and social boundaries. Communities possessed intimate knowledge of their own ancestral lineages, deities and customs yet remained ignorant of the outside world. In this “frog-at-the-bottom-of-a-well” condition, vision and imagination were firmly bounded by

physical separation.

Matching this state of social isolation were the monopolistic nature and functional limitations of early Chinese characters. Oracle bone script of the Shang Dynasty mainly served royal divination and sacrificial rituals, acting as a medium connecting humans and deities; bronze inscriptions of the Western Zhou Dynasty were mostly used for sacrifices, royal appointments, and recording meritorious deeds. The oracle bone script unearthed at Yinxu

is basically divination records of the rulers of the Shang Dynasty. Most are records of divinations for the Shang Dynasty or the Shang king personally, while a small part are divination records for nobles who maintained close ties with the Shang king. (Qiu, 1994, p. 41)

The creation and use of writing were strictly restricted to the royal family and a small number of high-ranking nobles (such as historians and diviners), carrying strong mystique and exclusivity. Early carriers including tortoise shells, animal bones and bronze wares were costly, making it inconvenient for large-scale recording and dissemination of knowledge (J. Li et al., 2019, p. 32).

Consequently, throughout most of the Shang and Western Zhou periods, knowledge production and consumption remained concentrated at the apex of the social pyramid. Knowledge could neither percolate down to lower social strata nor circulate across separate petty polities. A world partitioned by informational barriers could scarcely sustain the great intellectual florescence that depends on broad-scale exchange and critical engagement.

3. The Maturation of Chinese Writing and the Rise of the Prefecture-County System

The historical turning point arrived in the Spring-and-Autumn Period. Centuries of evolution brought qualitative transformations to the Chinese writing system. Character forms stabilized, semantic meanings became well-defined, and syntactic conventions grew increasingly standardized (Huang, 2014, pp. 112–117). Writing acquired sufficient expressive capacity to articulate complex political, philosophical and historical narratives. Meanwhile, bamboo and wooden slips had already come into existence as writing materials; they achieved widespread popularization in the Warring-States Period, furnishing material prerequisites for large-scale documentation and knowledge transmission. According to transmitted texts, Deng Xi, a minister of Zheng in the late Spring-and-Autumn Period, inscribed penal statutes onto bamboo slips, known as the *Bamboo Penal Code* (predating 501 BCE), an early textual attestation for bamboo slips used in secular official documents (Yang, 2016, p. 253). The earliest surviving archaeological bamboo-slip corpus comes from the Zeng-Hou-Yi tomb excavated in Suizhou, Hubei, dating to early Warring-States times (c. 433 BCE). The hoard contains 240 slips totaling roughly 6696 characters, consisting of burial inventories documenting chariots, horses and weaponry (Hubei Provincial Museum, 1989, pp. 480–485). This physical evidence confirms that bamboo slips were already deployed for practical written composition no later than the early Warring-States era.

According to *Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji)*, Confucius compiled and edited the Six Classics and left behind a widely known story about his diligent study — “the leather bindings

were worn out three times.” It tells that Confucius was so fond of reading *The I Ching* that the leather thongs binding the bamboo slips were worn through three times. Therefore, at least in Confucius’ era, bamboo slips had been relatively mature and prevalent in serving the function of books. Naturally, Confucius’ large-scale private schooling can also be inferred to be related to this.

This practical turn in Chinese writing directly catalyzed a revolutionary transformation in state governance: the emergence and expansion of the prefecture-county system. Before the advent of extensive documentary administration, the effective reach of political authority was heavily constrained; governance rested primarily upon kinship bonds and enfeoffment institutions. From the Spring-and-Autumn onward, as documentary bureaucracies expanded, central governments exercised more direct administrative control over distant territories through written decrees, statutes, household registers and territorial maps. The reform movements of the Warring-States represent, in essence, processes of bureaucratic state-building (Yan, 1996, p. 133).

Archaeological and textual evidence corroborates this trajectory. The county institution traces back to the early Spring-and-Autumn Period. *Shiji* (“Basic Annals of Qin”) notes that in the tenth year of King Wu of Qin (688 BCE), “the Rong tribes of Gui and Ji were conquered, and counties were first established there,” furnishing the earliest textual reference to county foundation. In the state of Chu, counties were installed over the conquered polities of Shen and Xi under King Wen of Chu (689–677 BCE) (Zhou, 2009, pp. 23–26). Relics such as the bronze dagger-axe inscribed with “Ziche” unearthed at the Maojiaping Site in Gangu, Gansu. Archaeological evidence indicates that this location was the former site of Ji County of the State of Qin, confirming that the State of Qin had established counties in border regions during the Spring and Autumn Period, with nobles directly appointed by the Duke of Qin to garrison the area (Liang et al., 2022, pp. 4–24; Shi, 2022, pp. 45–52).

These developments mark the emergence of a new territorial-bureaucratic state form grounded in geography and documentary administration, gradually superseding the old feudal order built on kinship and personal subordination. The spread of the prefecture-county system shattered the physical boundaries of the “small-state sparse-population” world. Hundreds of formerly discrete, mutually isolated polities were consolidated into several large-scale territorial powers. Human mobility expanded to unprecedented degrees; the closed “well-enclosed” local spheres were breached, and populations gained opportunities to step beyond their parochial horizons and encounter the wider world for the first time.

4. Intellectual Explosion and Mobility of the Shi Stratum

The dismantling of physical boundaries directly triggered large-scale circulation of information and talent, which ultimately converged into an intellectual explosion.

First came the aggregation and recombination of information. With the implementation of the prefecture-county system, cultures, legends, technologies and customs formerly belonging to separate petty states were incorporated under single political entities. To forge new national identities, rulers were motivated to collect, collate and compile histories and ballads of various

peoples under their dominion. The “Fifteen States Ballads” (*Shi Jing, Book of Songs*) extant today are traditionally believed to have been gathered by royal Zhou ballad-collecting officials across local regions, preserving a wealth of regional folksongs (Cheng, 1985, pp. 12–16). Likewise, individual states compiled their own annals: for instance, *Cheng* of Jin, *Tao Wu* of Chu, and *Chun Qiu* (*Spring and Autumn Annals*) of Lu (Zhao, 1980, “Li Lou II”). Essentially, this process integrated scattered, isolated “local knowledge” into public knowledge accessible to far broader audiences.

Warring-States bamboo manuscripts unearthed in recent decades furnish vivid material evidence for this convergence of knowledge. The Guodian Chu slips, published in 1998, were excavated from Tomb No. 1 at Guodian, Jingmen, Hubei, dated to approximately 300 BCE. The corpus contains 731 inscribed slips comprising eighteen texts, including both Confucian and Daoist works. Among them survive the earliest extant manuscript versions of the *Laozi*, alongside lost Confucian texts such as “Xing zi ming chu” (“Human Nature Derives from the Mandate”) and “Liu De” (“Six Virtues”) (Jingmen Museum, 1998, pp. 1–5). In 1994, the Shanghai Museum purchased a batch of scattered Chu bamboo slips from the Hong Kong antiquities market, totaling more than 1200 slips with approximately 35 000 characters (Ma, 2001, pp. 1–7). These bamboo slips were unearthed through illegal excavation, and their original excavation site remains unknown. After subsequent collation and publication in nine complete volumes, their contents cover more than eighty pre-Qin ancient books, including works of Confucianism, Daoism, military thought, and miscellaneous schools. The Tsinghua University Warring-States bamboo slips are another looted corpus consisting exclusively of transmitted texts rather than administrative archives. Their contents span pre-Qin philosophical thought, history, culture, astronomy-calendrics, legal arts and numerology (Liu, 2020, pp. 88–95). Several lost philosophical manuscripts therein exhibit marked intellectual syncretism among competing schools.

Notably, although these slips were unearthed in Chu tombs, their contents extensively absorb ideas and textual traditions from states across the Central Plains. As Liu observes, manuscripts excavated in Chu territories — including Guodian, Shanghai Museum slips and Anda slips — demonstrate that Eastern-Zhou Chu broadly assimilated intellectual traditions from other polities. Doctrines of diverse schools were transmitted and studied within Chu, mirroring the competitive academic scene of the Warring-States Contention of a Hundred Schools of Thought (Liu, 2024).

Second was the free mobility of talent. The prefecture-county system undermined the rigid hereditary aristocracy, opening avenues for upward social advancement for capable shi. According to *Zuo Zhuan* (“Duke Zhao, Year 17”), upon hearing Tan Zi expound on ancient official institutions, Confucius cited an old saying: “When the Son of Heaven loses state offices, learning circulates among the four barbarian peripheries.” This saying faithfully mirrors the downward diffusion of official knowledge beyond royal courts (Zuo et al., 1999, “Duke Zhao, Year 17”).

More importantly, the multi-state competitive order made talent a scarce, cross-border mobile resource. Intellectuals no longer owed exclusive loyalty to their native homelands; they moved

freely between states, “choosing a tree upon which to roost.” Confucius pioneered private schooling and advocated “education without class barriers,” opening knowledge once monopolized by aristocrats to commoners (Qian, 2011, pp. 89–94). Confucius traveling from state to state, Mozi rushing to defend Song, Mencius touring with disciples to persuade feudal lords, as well as the horizontal-vertical strategists Su Qin and Zhang Yi negotiating alliances, all exemplify this great age of intellectual mobility. Like frogs newly leaping out of their wells, these shi carried locally rooted knowledge and perspectives across polities, exchanging, contesting and synthesizing ideas, information and technologies from disparate regions.

This unprecedented large-scale, high-density circulation of information and talent brought about exponential growth of knowledge. Intellectual horizons expanded dramatically, and topics of reflection shifted from parochial tribal concerns toward universal inquiries into the cosmos, nature, society and human existence. Confronting the collapse of ritual order, different shi advanced sharply divergent solutions rooted in their own intellectual backgrounds and value commitments, thereby giving rise to Confucianism, Daoism, Mohism, Legalism, Logicians, Yin-Yang and other schools. They composed texts and engaged in critical disputation, igniting successive intellectual storms at academic centers such as the Jixia Academy (Bai, 1998, pp. 56–61). Fundamentally, the Contention of a Hundred Schools of Thought constituted a centuries-long intellectual explosion unleashed by the collapse of informational barriers.

5. Why Did the Contention of a Hundred Schools of Thought Occur Only Once?

The splendor of the hundred-schools movement proved ephemeral, drawing rapidly to a close with the establishment of the Qin-Han unified empires. This historical outcome corroborates the core argument advanced in this paper.

The unification of the six states by Qin established a centralized empire with the county system, marking the completion of the process of stepping out of the well. The realm was unified, and the physical well ceased to exist, yet an ideological well began to take shape. First, the disappearance of competition shrank the marketplace of ideas. Rivalry among feudal states served as a breeding ground for ideological diversity. When only one voice and one authority prevailed across the land, heterodox ideas lost their room to survive. In the thirty-fourth year of the reign of Qin Shi Huang (213 BC), Li Si, the Prime Minister, submitted a memorial:

All books of the *Songs*, the *Documents*, and the writings of the various schools of thought held by anyone in the realm, except those kept by the officials of the imperial academy, shall be delivered to the governors and commandants for burning. (Sima, 1982, p. 255)

Thus the Decree on Burning Books was enforced. In the following year, more than four hundred and sixty offenders were buried alive in Xianyang on the charge of spreading fallacies to delude the common people (Sima, 1982, pp. 257–258). In the first year of Yuanguang (134 BCE), Dong Zhongshu submitted his reply to the imperial examination of virtuous scholars, stating: “All teachings that do not fall within the six arts or the doctrines of Confucius shall be cut off, and shall not be allowed to develop alongside them” (Ban, 1962, p. 2523). In the fifth

year of Jianyuan, the imperial court had already established the Five Classics Scholars. Later, Gongsun Hong instituted the disciples of the scholars, gradually forming a system where official positions were obtained through mastery of the classics. This historical trend was later summarized as “rejecting all schools of thought and respecting Confucianism alone.” As Ge argued, this series of institutional changes reflects the co-optation and monopolization of ideology by the power of a unified empire (Ge, 2001, pp. 116–121).

Second, knowledge paradigms had stabilized. The Warring-States hundred-schools movement accomplished the “philosophical breakthrough” of ancient Chinese thought, establishing foundational frameworks for later reflections on society and human life. Over the subsequent two millennia, major intellectual advances largely took the form of reinterpretation within pre-existing traditions such as Confucianism and Daoism. Few instances recurred of the radical paradigm-founding creativity characteristic of pre-Qin thinkers (Yu, 2014, pp. 98–103).

Finally, writing itself underwent functional alienation. Within the unified empire, mature Chinese characters — formerly a tool breaking isolation and fueling intellectual explosion — achieved broader dissemination yet shifted function. From a medium for free intellectual exploration in the Warring-States period, writing increasingly served imperial administration and bureaucratic selection (the later imperial civil-service examinations constituted an extension of this tendency). Intellectual activity was thereby circumscribed within the institutional framework of empire (Yan, 1996, pp. 210–214).

Accordingly, the Contention of a Hundred Schools of Thought represents a non-replicable historical miracle. It unfolded within a unique historical window: old kin-based communities had disintegrated, while new territorial polities were not yet rigidly consolidated; writing had matured sufficiently to articulate complex ideas without being fully monopolized by state power; the Chinese-character sphere was moving from relative isolation toward intensified communication, yet multiple competing political entities still survived, preserving space for free intellectual circulation.

The immense historical tension generated by this transition from seclusion to interchange gave birth to the axial-age splendor of Chinese civilization. Indeed, such intellectual outbursts triggered by “breaking barriers” were not singular. During the Axial Age, civilizational spheres in China, India and the West remained largely isolated from one another yet independently experienced profound spiritual breakthroughs (Jaspers, 2018, pp. 27–31).

6. Conclusion

To summaries, the fundamental driving force behind the Contention of a Hundred Schools of Thought during the Spring-and-Autumn and Warring-States periods stemmed from a revolution in social-cognitive structures brought about by the maturity and diffusion of Chinese writing. Writing dismantled the physical and cognitive isolation of small-state societies inherited from Shang and Western-Zhou times, casting countless “frogs at the bottom of wells” into a vast ocean of knowledge. Free-flowing information, cross-state mobility of talent, and exponential growth of knowledge jointly furnished necessary conditions for this great intellectual florescence. This historical process reveals profoundly: civilizational vitality

derives from exchange and contestation, and technological progress — in this case the maturation of writing — constitutes the fundamental force that dissolves isolation and fosters interchange. Understanding this dynamic not only deepens our interpretation of the Contention of a Hundred Schools of Thought but also offers valuable perspective for reflecting upon laws governing civilizational evolution.

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