ABSTRACT

A Study of Xu Kai's Shuo Wen Jie Zi Xi Zhuan

Xu Kai (徐锴) (921-975) was a famous Chinese etymologist of Nan T'ang (南唐) in the Five Dynasties period (五代) and his work Shuo Wen Jie Zi Xi Zhuan (説文解字繫傳) was an important book on etymology of the Chinese language.

Xu Shen's Shuo Wen Jie Zi (許慎之説文解字), of course, was the first etymological dictionary ever published in China. It analyzed and explained in detail the form, the sound and the meaning of the Chinese script and gave a comprehensive treatment on its evolution from ancient times to the Han Dynasty. Undoubtedly, Shuo Wen has remained the most authoritative work on the subject since its publication.

During the T'ang Dynasty, however, Li Yang Bing (李陽冰), a famous calligrapher of Zhuan Shu (篆書 the Seal style) changed the written style of Zhuan Shu simply based on calligraphical grounds and put out a revised edition of Shuo Wen at his whim. In this new edition of Shuo Wen, Li took issue with the analysis and explanation by Xu Shen concerning the form, the sound and the meaning of the Chinese words and their evolution. Li, instead, offered his own interpretation which, in turn, caught the fancy of the intellectuals of the day so much so that it became the vogue and threw havoc into the understanding and interpretation of Chinese etymology.
Xu Kai's Shuo Wen Jie Zi Xi Zhuan was written for the purpose of rectifying such a state of affairs and putting Xu Shen's Shuo Wen back to what it was. The value of Xu Kai's Xi Zhuan, of course, was manifold. Firstly, it achieved its primary aim of restoring Shuo Wen to its original textual position. Secondly, it gave further insight into the original meaning of many Chinese words, pointing out the fact that the meaning of the Chinese words kept on changing since ancient times and the mistakes made by the intellectuals in writing and usage. As such, Xu Kai's Xi Zhuan was not only a book on Xu Shen's Shuo Wen, but also a book on Chinese etymology in general.

This thesis is divided into six chapters. The first chapter reviews the aims and contents of Xu Kai's Xi Zhuan. The second chapter is a biography of Xu Kai reconstructed based on materials drawn from numerous Chinese sources. The third chapter discusses the various editions of Xu Kai's Xi Zhuan since its first publication. Prior to the Ching Dynasty, Xi Zhuan was in manuscript form and was constantly copied and recopied manually thereby leading to serious textual variations and errors. The forth chapter deals with the contents of Xi Zhuan. The fifth chapter looks into the methods and principles used by Xu Kai in Xi Zhuan. The sixth chapter is an evaluation on Xi Zhuan, by way of comparing it with similar works dealing with Xu Shen's Shuo Wen, including the works by Xu Kai's brother Xu Xuan (徐釚) and selected scholars of the Ching Dynasty.