

THE APPEARANCE OF THE *QUEBI* TABOO METHOD WITH A REFLECTION ON USING *BIHUI* TO EXAMINE CHINESE SOURCES

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Although it has been traditionally accepted that *quebi* 缺筆, one of the name taboo (*bihui* 避諱) methods, appeared in Tang Gaozong's reign (649–683), a number of unexamined examples attest that *quebi* may have appeared in Tang Taizong's reign (626–649). This advancement enhances the usage of *bihui* to conduct research and urges us to rethink the 7th-century development of *bihui*.

Key words: *bihui*, taboo method, *quebi*, Tang Gaozong, Tang Taizong.

Introduction

Bihui or name taboo was an enduring ancient Chinese tradition which forbade users to write and speak the names of gods, ancestors, emperors and even enemies and so on. One of the most common taboo methods, *quebi*, has been believed to be invented in Tang Gaozong's reign, since Chen Yuan 陳垣, a noted Chinese scholar, first systematically examined *bihui* in 1928 in his essay, *Shihui juli* 史諱舉例, “the framework” of the field which “is regarded even today as a standard work” (Adamek 2015, pp. 12–13; Chen Yuan 1928, 1958).¹ Despite the 90-years consensus, however, this traditional theory can be refuted on several grounds.

Below, this paper first introduces the traditional argument. It then demonstrates that the *quebi* method was used earlier than the alleged first *quebi* examples. Our paper relies on two examples which are dated to 648 and advances that *quebi* first

¹ This paper refers to Chen Yuan's book published in 1958. For more evaluations of Chen Yuan's contribution, see Zhu Luchuan (2015) and Zhang Hengjun (2003).

appeared in Tang Taizong's reign. The paper concludes with discussions of the usefulness of this advancement.

Appearance in Tang Gaozong's Reign

In the writing of Chinese characters, the term *quebi* means to omit the strokes of characters – usually the last stroke. For example, 世 and 𠂇. The former is the orthodox orthography of *shi* 世. The latter lacks the last stroke, the long bottom horizontal line, and occurs in Dunhuang manuscript P.2536 which bears the date 663 (Dou Huaiyong 2010, p. 139).² It was written in that particular ‘wrong’ orthography in order to avoid *shi*, the first character contained in Tang Taizong's name, *shimin* 世民.³

This particular method to avoid names, according to Chen Yuan, appeared in the mid-7th century, and the principal argument rests upon the earliest examples. Chen Yuan argues that the earlier examples are ambiguous whereas the 7th-century illustrations are clear and ample. As his first indisputable illustrations are found in stones that were carved in Tang Gaozong's reign and bear the date 666, Chen Yuan specifies that *quebi* “must have started in Tang Gaozong's reign” (當起於唐高宗之世) (Chen Yuan 1958, p. 7). These alleged earliest examples have been recently re-confirmed by Adamek who paraphrases the term *quebi* as ‘the method of a missing stroke’ (Adamek 2015, p. 145, *sic.*):⁴

In the inscription of “Zengtai shikong xuangongbei” 贈泰師孔宣公碑 (Stone Stele Presented to the Greatest Teacher Confucius) from 666, the character *min* 泯 is written as *zhi* 𠂇. The case is regarded as the first known example of the method of a missing stroke. Similar instances can also be found in the “Zhining bei” 志寧碑 (Stone Stele of Zhining, 666) – *shi* 世 is written as *sa* 卅 in the expression *shiwu* 世武, and on the “Li He bei” 李賀碑 (Stone Stele of Li He) (677) – there is the *sa* 卅 character put in place of *shi* 世 in the name of Wang Shichong 王世充.

Quebi around 660

The following decree preserved in *Tanghuiyao* attests that *quebi* had been used around 660 for some time. According to the decree, Tang Gaozong intended to curb the excessive taboo of his name, *zhi* 治 (Wang Pu 961/1955, p. 452):⁵

² This manuscript will be revisited below.

³ For more *quebi* examples of this character, see Adamek (2015, pp. 54–55, 145), Michel Soymié (1990, pp. 388–389, 404), and Dou Huaiyong (2010, pp. 225–226).

⁴ The very first source should be transcribed as *Zeng taishi kongxuangong bei*. The full Chinese title of “Zhining bei” should be *Yu Zhining bei* 于志寧碑. The “Li He bei” should be the *Li Ji bei* 李勣碑.

⁵ It has to be noted though that traditionalists including Chen Yuan have observed this. See Adamek (2015, p. 144) and Chen Yuan (1958, p. 7).

On the first day of the first month in the fifth year of the Xianqing reign, it is decreed: “[...] When the ancient classics are copied, my name should either be omitted of strokes or replaced randomly by other characters. The meaning of elegant words of the six cannons, I am afraid, will be impacted. Should the versions be spread far and long, meanings will be changed completely. This is not the purpose of creating books. From now on, copying and editing old and canonic works shall be made in a convenient manner. There is no need to replace and modify [my name].” (顯慶五年正月一日詔。[...]比見抄寫古典。至於朕名。或缺其點畫。或隨便改換。恐六籍雅言。會意多爽。九流通義。指事全違。誠非立書之本。自今以後。繕寫舊典文字。並宜使成。不須隨義改易。)

Here, two implications interest us most. One is the pre-promulgation condition. According to the decree, taboo practice had already been very popular by 660. People seemed fanatical about avoiding the ruling emperor’s name *zhi*. Consequentially, many canonical texts were changed to such a degree that their original meanings were altered and their reading was impaired. Even the emperor himself was fairly disturbed by the extravagant practice.

The other implication is that Tang people were popularly using two taboo methods. One method was to replace *zhi* with other characters (synonyms). This is a very old method. Tang Chinese just continued to use it. The popularity of this method can be confirmed by many phrases in which *zhi* was substituted with synonyms. For example, the title of a 5th-century source, *Zhixianpu* 治縣譜, was renamed to *Lixianpu* 理縣譜 in *Nanshi* 南史. In this case, both *zhi* and *li* mean ‘govern’ or ‘administrate’. *Nanshi* is the official historical account of 4th- to 7th-century Chinese dynasties. It was compiled by Li Yanshou 李延壽 and submitted to Tang Gaozong who wrote a preface to it in 659. Understandably, Li Yanshou avoided the name of Tang Gaozong.⁶

The other method was *quebi*. Admittedly, Tang Gaozong neither used the very term, nor offered an example. However, there is little doubt that he was referring to the *quebi* method. The Chinese phrase “*que qi dian hua*” (缺其點畫) is straightforward. Each character is simple and unambiguous. Except for the reading of the *quebi* method, on the basis of their literal meaning ‘lacking dots and strokes’, there is no other way to interpret these four characters. In other words, *quebi* appeared earlier than the year 666. It had been used for some time before 660.

Pre-666 *quebi* Occurrences in Tang Gaozong’s Reign

The following examples exhibit that the above so-called earliest *quebi* examples are not even the first usage of *quebi* in Tang Gaozong’s reign.

⁶ For more similar examples, see Adamek (2015, p. 245), Wang Jian (2011, pp. 266–267), and Wang Yankun (2009, pp. 406–413).

Dou Huaiyong discovered a number of *quebi* examples used in 663. His examples are found in the above-mentioned manuscript P.2536. In this source, the last strokes of *bing* 丙 (𠂇), *shi* 世 (卩), *min* 民 (𠂇), and *zhi* 治 (𠂇) are omitted on multiple occasions (Dou Huaiyong 2010, p. 139).⁷

However, these examples are still two decades later than the following example that I found by accident. The example, 治, occurs in a straightforward phrase “*zhiren*” (治人, govern people) used by *Zhou Zhongyin zhi* 周仲隱誌 or Zhou Zhongyin’s tombstone inscription.⁸ Compared with the orthodox form, this example lacks the last two strokes. Unquestionably, it is one of the *quebi* taboos of Tang Gaozong’s name, *zhi*.

According to the inscription, Zhou Zhongyin had a successful career and was bestowed with high titles by the court. He died on “the twentieth day of the first month, in the twenty-third year of the Zhenguan reign” (貞觀廿三年正月廿日, March 8th, 649) and was buried tenth months later in Luoyang, on “the twenty-fifth day of the tenth month” (十月廿五日, December 4th, 649) (Ibid.).⁹ On the evidence of this dating, our example appears to be earlier than any other known *quebi* taboos of *zhi*. It demonstrates that *quebi* was already used no later than the year 649.

The Introduction of *quebi* in Tang Taizong’s Reign

In fact, Zhou Zhongyin’s tombstone inscription already suggests that *quebi* might have appeared in Tang Taizong’s reign. Zhou Zhongyin died in March. Tang Taizong passed away in July. Conceivably, Zhou Zhongyin’s family might have carved the tombstone before Tang Taizong’s death and buried it on the funeral in December.

In addition to this possibility, these two examples, 虜 and 虜, are unequivocal. They are the earliest *quebi* occurrences I have found. Although they are hardly mentioned by many taboo experts, the following five reasons strongly point to the conclusion that they are *hu* 虎 (虜) that lacks the last vertical stroke. The purpose of employing these two examples was to avoid the name of Li Hu 李虎 (?–551), the grandfather of Li Yuan 李淵 who created the Tang dynasty 唐朝 in 618.

The first reason is that the source is genuine. The two examples occur in *Shan-jianlü* 善見律, a Tang Buddhist manuscript famous for its exquisite calligraphy (23 centimetres × 457 centimetres). As shown below, its production information is clear. The manuscript was produced by the Tang court. Most likely, it was once used by Emperor Tang Taizong. Moreover, as attested by private seals and historical notes, this manuscript had been the property of the elite Chinese throughout history. For some time it was kept in the imperial library and was examined by several emperors

⁷ I have re-examined each example by downloading manuscript images from the website of the International Dunhuang Project, <http://idp.bl.uk/>. All websites referred to in this paper were retrieved on July 5th, 2017.

⁸ The example is found in Column 30 of the Beijing tushuguan jinshizu (1997, p. 200).

⁹ All the Chinese dates used in this paper are transferred into the Western calendar via the Sino-Western Calendar Transfer Program offered by Academia Sinica at <http://sinocal.sinica.edu.tw>.

of different dynasties. Currently, it is housed at the Palace Museum 故宫博物院 in Beijing.¹⁰

The second reason is that the context reveals that the two examples are the character *hu* 虎. The first example takes place in the phrase “*hu lang shizi*” (虎狼師[獅子]); the second example in the phrase “*shanhu hupo jin yin*” (珊瑚 虎[琥]珀金銀) (Sun Baowen 2012, pp. 6, 29).¹¹ As these two phrases consist of only general nouns, there is no any other way to read them otherwise than the following interpretation. The first phrase refers to three ferocious beasts, *hu* (虎) for ‘tiger’, *lang* for ‘wolf’, and *shizi* for ‘lion’; the second phrase to four expensive matters, *shanhu* for ‘coral’, *hupo* (虎[琥]珀) for ‘amber’, *jin* for ‘gold’, and *yin* for ‘silver’.

The third reason is that *Shanjianlü* was sanctioned by the Tang court. This is suggested by the stringent quality control of its production. According to the colophon, the manuscript was written on seven pieces of paper by a professional scribe, Guo Quan 國詮, on “the tenth day of the twelfth month in the twenty-second year of the Zhenguan reign” (貞觀廿二年十二月十日, December 29th, 648) (Idem, p. 31). The text was then proofread first by Dao Yi 道嶷 and then by Fa Lun 法倫, two Buddhist monks from two different monasteries. After editing, these loose pieces were bound by a professional called Fu Wenkai 輔文開. Moreover, each procedure seems to have been witnessed by government representatives. As stated by the colophon, the production was supervised by four officials, Ma Renyi 馬仁義, Zhao Mu 趙模, Lu Zhengchen 盧爭臣, and Wei Dan 蔚丹, while the whole project was overseen by Yan Liben 閻立本, a top court official who was also a well-known calligrapher and painter. Given such rigorous quality control, the making of this manuscript was unquestionably serious court business. The manuscript was most probably intended to be read by Emperor Tang Taizong. In short, this Buddhist source was produced with the highest possible standards, including the name taboo practice.

In addition, Chinese historical accounts document that *hu* should be avoided, because the name bearer Li Hu was posthumously elevated to emperor. According to *Tanghuiyao*, Li Yuan, one month after he took the throne, created Li Hu “Jing Emperor” (景皇帝) and placed his name tablet in the ancestral temple for worship (Wang Pu 961/1955, p. 1). Probably because of the influence of the ancestral worship, *hu* remained widely tabooed throughout the Tang dynasty. For example, it was often replaced by *wu* 武 – the phrase *hupi* 虎皮, the official position *huben* 虎賁, and the geographic name *hulao* 虎牢 were changed into *wupi* 武皮, *wuben* 武賁, and *wulao* 武牢, respectively.¹²

Finally, forms similar to the above two examples have been identified as *quebi* taboos of *hu*. Soymié (1990, p. 404) discusses four forms: 𪛗 (P.2530), 𪛘 (P.3371), 𪛙 (P.2717), and 𪛚 (P.2717). Dou Huaiyong (2010, pp. 220–221) finds many more illustrations. From manuscript P.2457 alone, for instance, he recognises these two forms:

¹⁰ For more information, visit the official website <http://www.dpm.org.cn/collection/handwriting/231479.html>.

¹¹ This manuscript can be easily found on the Internet.

¹² For more examples, see Adamek (2015, pp. 52, 236, 238, 273), Wang Jian (2011, pp. 199–203), and Wang Yankun (2009, pp. 103–117).

虜 and 虜. The first and second forms examined by the two scholars are exactly the same as our first and second examples.

Arguably, the two examples discussed are *quebi* taboos of *hu*. They were deliberately written by the scribe to deviate from the orthodox orthography. As no other earlier examples have been confirmed, we can claim that the *quebi* method might have been introduced during Tang Taizong's reign or at a certain time between 626 and 648.

Implications

We should abandon the traditional view that *quebi* first appeared during Tang Gaozong's reign. This view does not hold. The earliest examples it rests upon are not the earliest usage of *quebi*. There are a number of earlier examples dated to Tang Gaozong's reign. At this stage of research, the *quebi* method, as far as unequivocal examples can be demonstrated, first appeared during Tang Taizong's reign or at a certain time between 626 and 648. Therefore, we have to reassess the common knowledge about how *bihui* developed in the early 7th century.

In addition, the argument of this paper has wider implications. Taboo examples, especially those concerned with the Chinese emperors' names, can be accurately traced back to some known persons. The results of this study, therefore, can allow us to better use taboos in our research. Given the limits, this paper draws two implications regarding the examination of chronology and authenticity.

When determining the authenticity of a pre-7th-century Chinese source, the general guidance should be: if it employs *quebi* to taboo a name, its authenticity should be treated with great care. No source might be made earlier than the appearance of any applied method.

As for dating the sources, the general instruction is: if a document employs only the *quebi* method to avoid the characters *bing* 昞, *bing* 丙, *hu* 虎, *yuan* 淵, *shi* 世, and/or *min* 民, it seems to have been produced earlier than we commonly believe. Its *terminus post quem* could be Tang Taizong's reign instead of Tang Gaozong's reign.

Admittedly, although our new theory and instructions may be enhanced when more sources are brought to light, the traditional view initiated in 1928 should be discarded. It is now certain that *quebi* appeared earlier than Tang Gaozong's reign. It was already used in 648.

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