

A Comparative Study of Reforms on Language Policy in Persian and Qin Empire

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Abstract. After establishing a territory extensive, multicultural and diverse ethnic empire, in order to consolidate power, Darius I and the First Emperor of Qin carried out a quite similar reform, but they took the opposite approaches to language policy: Darius adopted a loose language policy, allowing people who lived on the conquered lands to remain their languages and scripts, while the First Emperor of Qin adopted the “unification of scripts and pronunciation” policy, abolished the paleography in the former six countries and formed a consolidated official character based on the Qing characters named “seal character”. Therefore, this paper uses the comparative historical analysis approach to compare the historical background, influential factors and results of the two different language policies adopted by Darius and the First Emperor of Qin; it reveals that the “unification of script” policy was the key or at least one of the key, to not only increase effectiveness and accuracy in decree passing but also to form cultural memory of the polity which was the foundation of national identity to increase the stability and continuity of an empire.

Keywords: Language policy; Persian Empire; Qin Empire.

1. Introduction

Around the 4th century BCE, two great empires rose on opposite ends of Asia: the Persian Empire and the Qin Empire. Persian Empire, the first empire in the world that crossed Europe, Asia and Africa, reached its peak after the reform of Darius I and lasted over two hundred years. Qin empire, the first empire established in ancient China, whose legacy influenced the following dynasties and the history of China, is the first and only pre-modern political entity in the world to unify script.

Although these two empires were thousands of miles apart, Darius I and emperor Qin Shi Huang both took quite similar reformation measures on the military, infrastructure, law and monetary systems to consolidate their domination. According to Finer, ancient empires can be divided into four types; the Persian empire and the Qin empire were both an empire with “central and standardised administration”, but only the Qin empire had “homogenised culture, language and law” [1]. Comparing the reform contents of the two empires, the biggest difference was the language policy, which might be the reason why these two empires diverted into different paths. Facing such a large territory and diverse cultures and ethnics, there are two things crucial for the rulers, that is to “fight against the distance” between the central government and conquered regions and how to ensure that orders could be delivered and implemented effectively, which was the foundation of empire ruling [2]. The script, one main component of language, a medium of information delivery, naturally carries cultural attributes and has a profound impact on political entities[3].

The definition of language policy is to intervene, adapt and manage language situations in the government for the specific purpose [4]. Although current research on language policy started around the 1960s, whose main objective was to solve the language issues for emerging states after world war II, therefore, it was an emerging discipline [5]. However, ancient states had already researched language policy for thousands of years; the “unification of Script” in the Qin dynasty was one significant example. Research about the reform of Darius mainly focuses on economic, legal, and military aspects and their positive impacts on the Persian empire and highlights the loose cultural and religious policies, and analyses language policy on the linguistic level or application perspective. Referring to the reform of emperor Qin Shihuang (the First Emperor of Qin), scholars mainly highlight the significance of the language policy or criticise the despotic and centralised ruling of the

Qin empire. In current studies, the Qin empire was often considered short-lasting, while the Han empire was often considered as the longest and most important empire in Chinese history. However, even though it replaced the Qin empire, it inherited most accomplishments of the Qin empire, especially the political institution and its script, measurement, monetary system and infrastructure. Therefore, the Qin empire was actually the Qin-Han empire, which lasted over four hundred years. However, very few scholars have compared the Persian and Qin-Han empires, two long-lasting, territory-extensive and diverse ethnic empires, not to mention the differences between the two reform policies. Therefore, this paper was determined to use the comparative historical approach, an approach that uses comparative methods to go deep into a historical event to gain a general explanation of macro issues to analyse the causal mechanism behind the reformation process based on, taking “language policy” as a variant, teasing out the reasons and causes, the implementation process and the results, aiming to find out the interactions between language policy and empire stability and continuity [6].

2. Reasons for Adoption of Language Policy

It is difficult to measure the exact territory of the Persian Empire during Darius’ reign, but there was data that could indirectly show how large the territory was. In Herodotus’ History, the royal road from Ephesus of Asia Minor to the administrative centre of Persian Susa measures 2600 kilometres. It is said to be the best-equipped road in Persian, which would take a person three months and three days’ walk to cover the whole distance [7]. The Qin dynasty initially unified the six countries with limited territory, but it expanded rapidly after the imperial expansion and continued to extend since the unification and afterwards during Emperor Wu’s reign. According to the geography section of the history of the Han Dynasty, the distance from east to west was over 3800 kilometres, and from north to south was about 5480 kilometres.

During Darius’ reign, there lived various ethnic groups. As the Persepolis reliefs indicated, there are representatives of over 20 countries who speak various languages bringing their tribute, such as Egyptians, Ionians, Parthians, Indians, and Arabians. Moreover, for the First Emperor of Qin, in order to unify ancient China, he conquered the former six states (Qi, Chu, Yan, Zhao, Han and Wei state), and then the state of Baiyue in the south and Xiongnu in the north speak and write quite differently. Therefore, these two empires, with such an extensive and expansive territory as well as ethnic diversity, both have to face two challenges: First, how to deliver orders of rulers effectively and precisely; Second, how to cope with the diverse culture in different regions in order to rule. To deal with these two challenges, other than building the road system and establishing bureaucracy as both Darius and the First Emperor of Qin did, language policy, including oral and script, is another crucial method, as it is a key component in the order delivering process and the interaction among different cultures. Language policy was mentioned in the reform of the First Emperor of Qin, which was called “the unification of script”. Although language policy did not mention in the reform of Darius, there can be pieced together according to the archaeological materials of the Persian Empire period.

2.1. Language policy in Persian Empire and Qin Empire

Language policy consists of two parts: language status, which is to determine the social status (common language, official language, education, public language, etcetera) of language; language corpus, which is to reform, regulate and perfect the language and its character [4]. In the following part, there will be an analysis of language status and language corpus in the Persian and Qin Empire and why, accordingly.

2.1.1 Language policy in Qin Empire

According to Xu Shen’s Paraphrasing Texts and Words, right after the First Emperor of Qin unified ancient China, prime minister Li Si advised the emperor to unify or regulate current scripts by abolishing or modifying scripts that have different shapes with Qin characters. In order to unify the script, Li Si, Zhao Gao and Hu Wujing wrote three articles as samples for the newly modified

script “seal character (Xiaozhuan)” based on the script written in “Shi Zhou large seal script (Dazhuan, all the scripts before the unification in a broad sense; script of Qin before the unification in a narrow sense)” of Zhou dynasty [8]. After the reform of the script, the characters in Qin Empire became more regulated, and the letterform became simpler. Moreover, it was imposed to be used as the official language within the bureaucracy and “Shuihudi Qin bamboo slips” indicated that there was a professional institution called “Xue Shi (teaching and learning institution)” to train officials on writing governmental documents in “Xiaozhuan” [9]. However, with the expansion of territory and the complexity of bureaucracy, it occurred an unexpected phenomenon: the appearance of “Li shu”, a script “modified by jailers based on ‘Xiaozhuan’ because the large amount of paperwork written in ‘Xiaozhuan’ was time-consuming”, it took the popularisation of the script to a new stage. Letterform of “Li Shu” was flat and straight and much simpler than “Xiaozhuan”, which made it a carrier more efficient and accurate in the information passing process and much easy to learn for the public; therefore, it became the most widely used script in Qin Empire and acknowledged by the government as the official and public language.

Why does the First Emperor choose this “unification of script” policy? First of all, the unification or standardisation of script is a traditional trend in ancient China; it does not occur after Qin dynasty unified the whole of ancient China. In the Zhou dynasty, rulers would summon officials of the vassal state to train to read and write official documents, which indicated that the language and writing in the Spring and Autumn Period and warring state period derived from the official language in Zhou dynasty [3]. In Zhou Dynasty, the Qin state was a vassal state established later than the other vassal states of Zhou and located far away from the cultural centre. Therefore, because of the isolation in geography, Qin dynasty inherited the culture and script of the Zhou dynasty and remained unchanged while scripts in other states evolved dramatically [10]. Because of this cultural basis, Qin could possibly use “Xiaozhuan” to replace the scripts of the former six states [11]. Secondly, the unification of characters policy consists of two goals, it not only aims to regulate and simplify the script but, more importantly, to abolish the palaeography in the former six countries. Although Qin has accomplished the goal of unifying all the regions in ancient China, old aristocracies of the former six states still have power and are closely attached to their own culture. As script has the cultural attribute, the promoting process of “Xiaozhuan” of Qin is the process of erasing cultures or impairing the cultural heritage of the former six states [3]. Thirdly, during the Qin-Han period, writing has been widely used in state ruling activities, including political order delivery, demographics, contract, taxation and laws [12]. In order to increase administrative efficiency, the unification of script is a proven and effective method. Finally, it is to fulfil the demands of the users of the script, the officials and the public.

In conclusion, the language policy of Qin was initially to unify diverse scripts in Qin Empire into “Xiaozhuan” as the official language based on the empire’s political demands but then shifted to “Li shu” to meet the demands of its users, and it became the common script in Qin-Han Empire.

2.1.2 Language policy in Persian Empire

Unlike Qin Empire, the language policy in Persian Empire was more complex; for example, the famous Behistun inscription was written in Old Persian, Akkadian and Elamite; the inscription on Darius’ statue, which was found at Susa was in Old Persian, Elamite, Babylonian as well as in hieroglyphic [13]. In such a diverse ethnical empire (Babylonian, Antalonian, Egyptian, Elamite and more), the inefficiency in communication could cause severe political and administrative problems. Therefore, it was vitally important to establish a system to deliver royal orders to the satrapies of the Empire and to ensure that the various linguistic groups could understand the orders. During the reign of Darius I, the administration system has three levels: the first level is the Persian kings, the second level includes high officials in the central court and satraps in satrapies (mostly Persians), the third level is officials in local districts [14]. In order to facilitate communication among these three groups, there were three main official languages used in Persian Empire during Darius’ reign: Old Persian, Elamite and Aramaic. Old Persian was a court language spoken and written by the kings to transmit

royal ideology and for propaganda purposes, as well as a non-written administrative language spoken by the high-rank Persian officials (including officials in the royal court and satraps in satrapies) and to declare a decree which then will be translated into other local languages and Aramaic by the class of interpreters (*sēpiru/teppir*). Aramaic was the common language spoken and written in satrapies as a bridge to the central government and local administrations [15]. However, even when Aramaic was used widely throughout the empire, local languages like Egyptian, Elamite, Babylonian and more, did not disappear but continued to be used by individuals. Unlike other local languages that were used in quite a limited area, Elamite was used as an official language in southern and western Iran for quite a period which can be attested by the archaeological evidence (documents related to official regulations, accounting) discovered in Persepolis. In general, the language policy in Persian Empire can be summarised that kings or/and officials in royal court passed decrees to satraps in Old Persian, and satraps described decrees to a *sēpiru/teppir* who mastered more than two languages (Old Persian and Aramaic or one local language) [13].

Why would Darius adopt such a complex language policy rather than unifying the language and the script? First of all, writing the same inscription in more than one language was not an innovation of the Achaemenid Empire; it could date back to ancient Akkadians, and many districts in the Persian empire were initially allies who joined actively rather than being conquered. Therefore, since the establishment of the Persian Empire, it adopted a loose policy to treat every ethnicity equally and respect their own languages, cultures and religions. Secondly, during Darius' reign, the Old Persian was merely in its infancy (invented around 525 BC based on), compared with Aramaic, who has been used since the 7th century B.C. and compared with the Elamite who has been used since the Neo-Elamite kingdom [16, 17]. Thirdly, using Aramaic as a lingua franca is much more efficient and less costly than Old Persian as it was already widely used in the whole empire as it was used already by Assyrians and the Babylonians earlier, and compared with Old Persian or Elamite written in cuneiforms on clay tablets, Aramaic was an alphabetic script written on leather and much easy to write and to carry around [18]. Finally, it would be costly to train every official in local districts to learn Old Persian. The Persian Empire has merely established for 38 years when Darius implemented the reform and has just finished another round of imperial expansion which included more ethnics with diverse languages; it was difficult for the empire to take spare time and energy to unify the script in the whole empire.

To conclude, the language policy in Persian Empire was to use Aramaic as the official written script and Old Persian as the court language to deliver decrees between central government and satrapies while local languages were still used within their districts based on the administrative system.

2.2. Influences of Language Policy on the Persian and Qin Empire

For Qin Empire, objectively speaking, the goal of “unification of script” did not achieve completely as it collapsed in quite a short period after the death of the First Emperor of Qin, and it was impossible for people in the former six states to master the unfamiliar newly formed script in that short of period. Therefore, the unification process started from Qin, and the Han Empire picked up the unfinished project after replacing Qin, and once it was completed, it increased the efficiency of the administrative system dramatically and increased the centralisation of the empire. Moreover, there are several by-products of this script unification. Firstly, the unification of script facilitated inter-ethnic interaction and integration, thus establishing the linguistic basis for the cultural identity of the “Chinese ethnic” and forming a political and cultural community in ancient China; secondly, before and during the Qin Empire, there formed a series of classical texts that recorded the experiences and thoughts of people before that, including the Four Books and the Five Classics, constitute the core idea of Chinese culture. During the process of script unification, the empire trained a class of cultural elites, “Shi”, who are skilled in using the official script, well comprehended the classical texts, cared about the cultural inheritance and continuity of the Chinese civilisation and also capable of dealing with the political, legal or military affairs [19]. During wartime, this class of cultural elite will lurk among the public, but once it is peacetime, “Shi” will attach themselves to new political entities and

use their knowledge to govern. Thirdly, as an atypical caesaropapism civilisation, power and script in ancient China relied on each other; rulers will need to look for legitimacy to rule in the classical cultural texts rather than religious texts. The interaction within classical texts, “Shi” and the rulers, further reinforces the national identity and make sure the continuity of Chinese culture [20].

As for Persian Empire, because of the local autonomy policy on administration, language and culture, lifestyle and custom, diverse ethnics within the Persian Empire were able to live relatively harmoniously and less costly both in time and in finance. However, the “centralisation in central government (mostly Persians) and autonomy in local districts (mostly non-Persians)” ruling system caused a potential but crucial problem between Persians and non-Persians. Local people were able to preserve their own cultures, languages and religions; there was not necessary for them to gain knowledge about the Persian culture, while there was no need for Persians in central government to propagandise their culture. Therefore, it was impossible for the diverse ethnicities within the empire to form a national identity that, once there the empire collapsed, it would never be rebuilt. Moreover, due to the three-level political order delivery system, decrees of the kings will merely pass to the satrapy and then be translated two times by satrapies and local elites. Therefore, it could cause misread or even worse deliberate misinterpretation, which could compromise the stability of the empire.

3. Conclusion

Comparing the language policy differences between Qin Empire and Persian Empire illustrated that the two empires chose two contrasting policies based on their historical background and the political demands when growing into a territory extensive and diverse ethnic empires. Proof by facts that these two policies each have advantages and disadvantages: Persian Empire survived for over two hundred years because of its cultural inclusion policy; although Qin Empire who adopted the unification of script policy lasted for only a short period, but its successor Han Empire inherit its legacy and lasted for over four hundred years, and often eventually reunited after collapses in the following two millennium period. However, compared with the easier and less costly loose language policy adopted by Persian Empire, even though the unification of script policy requires more investments in time, finance and human resources, it has better effects on the continuity of the empire as it was more effective and precise in decree passing, and the classical texts written in newly formed script formed cultural memory of Chinese culture while the cultural elite class who were trained based on the classical texts established their cultural identity became the glue that holds the empire together and the vehicle to pass the Chinese culture. This cultural integration brought by the unification of script was the main difference between the two empires and it was what language policy of Persian Empire was not managed to achieve, which caused political unstable in the Persian Empire period and never rebuilt after the collapse. At last, the limitations of the paper are: the focus of this study is on language policy. However, there are various factors that would affect the lifespan of an empire, and the study objects are limited to the Persian and Qin Empire which uncovered other empires that appeared in history. Therefore, future studies could expand the focus and objects to explore the topic further.

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