Answer key to written vernacular exercise

Study the following data and answer the questions

(1) In Classical Chinese there are two major words for the first-person pronoun (I, my, me), i.e. wú吾 and wǒ我. The following sentences from *Pre-Qin (prior to 221bc) texts* show the typical uses of these two words.

**吾** 聞 之 矣 (Mencius)

**Wú** wén zhī yǐ

I hear it sentence-final particle

I have heard it

**吾** 日 三 省 **吾** 身 (Analects)

**Wú** rì sān xǐng **wú** shēn

I day three examine my body

I examine my conduct three times a day

子 非 **我** (Zhuangzi)

Zǐ fēi **wǒ**

You not-be me

You are not I

大宰 知 **我** 乎？ (Analects)

Dà zǎi zhī **wǒ** hū

High officer know me question-particle

Does the high officer know me?

今 者 **吾** 喪 **我** (Zhuangzi)

Jīn zhě **wú** sàng **wǒ**

Now topic-marker I lose me

I have just lost me (i.e. myself)

**Question 1:** According to the data listed above, what is the difference between 吾and 我in the Pre-Qin era?

In all of these examples, wú is used as the subject or the possessive, as in the second use of wú in the second sentence. The other form wǒ is used as the object only in these examples.

The contrast is especially clear in the fifth sentence where it say “I lost me”.

(2) In the *Tang Dynasty (618–907ad)*, Classical Chinese was still used for most formal writings in the form of Literary Chinese. But some changes took place nevertheless. The following data are from Tang Dynasty texts in Literary Chinese.

以 **吾** 心 之 思 足下，知 足下 懸懸 於 **吾** 也

Yǐ **wú** xīn zhī sī zúxià, zhī zúxià xuánxuán yú **wú** yě

With my heart particle think you know you worried about me particle

I think about you from my perspective, and know that you are thinking of me.

道 豈 在 **吾**

Dào qǐ zài **wú**

Tao Q-particle exist.in me

How can the Tao lie in me?

**吾** 從 而 師 之

Wú cóng ér shī zhī

I follow and teacher him

I follow and regard him as my teacher.

**Question 2:** In terms of the grammatical function of 吾, what in these Tang Dynasty examples is different from the Pre-Qin era examples from part (1)?

In Classical Chinese, wú is not usually used as the object. But in the Tang Dynasty examples here, wú can be used as the object, i.e. as the object of the preposition yú in the first sentence and as the object of zài in the second sentence.

The first wú in the first sentence is used as the possessive, and the wú in the third sentence is used as the subject. These are typical uses of wú in Classical Chinese.

Thus it seems that in the Tang Dynasty, wú is used more commonly than before in Literary Chinese.

(3) Popular novels in the Tang Dynasty were written for the common people in a language closer to the spoken language at that time. Such written materials are called “written vernacular”, as opposed to Classical Chinese, which was still used at that time. 鶯鶯傳(The Story of Ying Ying) is a famous short story of about 3,500 characters. There *are eight instances of the use of 我, and only one instance of the use of 吾*. The following examples are from *The Story of Ying Ying*.

**我** 不 可 奈何 矣

**Wǒ** bù kě nàihé yǐ

I not able how-to-deal-with sentence-final particle

I can’t do anything about it

索 **我** 於 枯 魚 之 肆 矣

Suǒ **wǒ** yú kū yú zhī sì yǐ

Search me at dry fish particle store sentence-final particle

Looked for me in the store that sells dried fish

**Question 3:** In terms of the grammatical function of 我, how is the spoken language at that time different from Classical Chinese in the Pre-Qin era in part (1) and the Literary Chinese in the Tang Dynasty in part (2)?

The first wǒ here is used as the subject, which is not common in Pre-Qin Classical Chinese. In the Literary Chinese in the Tang Dynasty, as shown in the examples in part (2), wú would be more commonly used as the subject.

The second wǒ here is used as the object of a verb, which is consistent with the usage in Classical Chinese. But in the Literary Chinese examples in part (2), wú is used as the object instead of wǒ.

(4) In most modern Chinese dialects, only 我 is widely used. So now we have the historical records regarding the first-person pronoun (singular). Can you illustrate the path of development of the first-person pronoun (singular) throughout the history of the Chinese language?

In Classical Chinese, there is a case distinction between wú and wǒ, with the former commonly being used as the subject and possessive, and the latter as the object.

In Literary Chinese, wú is used widely in place of wǒ.

In texts that contain more colloquialisms during the period when Literary Chinese was used, wǒ is used widely in place of wú.

Therefore it seems that the predominant use of wú in Literary Chinese is more of a case of classicism. While in the actual spoken language, wǒ is more widely used.

Taking all these points into consideration, we can say that the case distinction disappeared in the post-Classical era gradually with wǒ replacing wú, and ultimately wǒ continued to develop into the various forms of first person pronouns in modern Chinese dialect.