

The ancient Chinese origin of some Mon-Khmer words

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1. Introduction: Chinese Jianmu symbol

It has been commonly held that the set of Chinese words, such as shown in Chart B, containing a symbol called ‘Jianmu,’ were originally loan words from Mon-Khmer (or other Austroasiatic) languages in south central China. But recent studies may indicate the opposite, i.e, that these ‘Jianmu’ words were borrowed from Ancient Chinese into these Mon-Khmer languages.

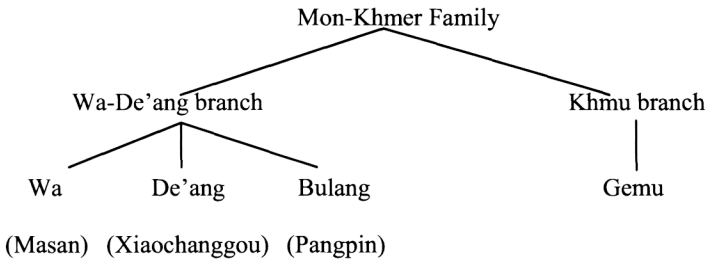


Chart A. Mon-Khmer dialects spoken in China (village names)

The written ‘Jianmu’ symbol itself is not rare in Chinese but it has puzzled scholars for some time, and some linguists have taken it as evidence for a Mon-Khmer origin of some elements of Chinese.

‘Jianmu’ is the name of an initial consonant in ancient Chinese. As there were no phonetic symbols in ancient times to record Chinese speech sounds, our ancestors had to use Chinese characters to indicate initial consonants. So Jian [tɕien⁵¹] is written as 见 in the phonetic system of ancient Chinese, representing the consonant *k/kl*, and [mu²¹⁴] 母 is the name of a Chinese character indicating initial consonants. So ‘Jianmu’ is 见母. Other examples of initial consonants are Xi [ci⁵⁵] 溪 plus 母 gives Ximu 溪母, indicating initial *kh/khl*; Qun [tɕyn³⁵] 群 plus 母 gives Qunmu 群母 indicating initial *g/gl*, and so on. There were altogether 36 mu (or 36 initial consonants with separate characters) in the Chinese Middle Ages.

2. Jianmu evidence in Chinese and Mon-Khmer languages

Chart B gives a sampling of words with Jianmu from Chinese and related words in various Mon-Khmer dialects in southwestern China. The local Mon-Khmer samples here are taken from the Masan, Xiaochanggou and Pangpin dialects. (Numbers indicate tones.)

	Local Mon-Khmer	Modern Chinese	Cantonese	Meaning
	(Masan) kloŋ	tɕiaŋ ⁵⁵	kɔŋ ⁴⁴	‘river’
	(Xiaochanggou) klaŋ	tɕiaŋ ²¹⁴	kɔŋ ⁵⁵	‘speak’
	(Pangpin) kliau	tɕiau ²¹⁴	ka:u ³⁵	‘stir’

Chart B. Samples of 3 Jianmu words

These Mon-Khmer words and Modern Chinese words seem to contain both Chinese and Mon-Khmer elements. Their finals are similar but the initials are different. What is not yet clear is the direction of the borrowing. Did Ancient Chinese borrow these Mon-Khmer words, or did Proto-Mon-Khmer borrow these Ancient Han Chinese elements?

Prof. Wangli, a specialist in Ancient Chinese, has studied this question and has proposed the original phonetic quality of the Jianmu in Ancient Chinese, and also proposed an historical date for the Jianmu borrowing. He suggests that Chinese, as well as these three Jianmu words, and others like them had initial ‘k’ rather than ‘tɕ’ around the 2nd century B.C. So he reconstructs the ancient Chinese forms to have been [kɔŋ] ‘river’, [kɔŋ] ‘speak’ and [kau] ‘stir’.

Thus the Jianmu symbol was pronounced ‘k’, at least in Chinese of that time. In modern Cantonese, these words actually do have ‘k’ initials (these sounds in Cantonese are called ‘live middle-ancient Chinese sounds’). So this supports Wang’s theory and explains why the Mon-Khmer words would have ‘k’. But that does not explain why there is the ‘l’ in the Mon-Khmer words or the ‘i’ in some Modern Chinese.

3. Zhuang evidence for original consonant clusters

Looking further abroad to Zhuang, a Kam-Tai language centered in Wuming, we find further evidence concerning Jianmu.

The Chinese ‘tɕ’ initial is found mainly in modern Chinese, seldom in older Chinese. But most of those older forms do contain the Jianmu symbol. Many sinologists believe that there was a set of initial consonant clusters in ancient Chinese, for example, *pl*, *kl*, *tl*, etc. In view of that, we made a detailed study of similar words in ancient Chinese and modern Chinese, as well as

Kam-Tai languages. It was found that some Jianmu words consistently correspond to ‘kl’ in modern Zhuang.

Modern Chinese words with Jianmu	Wang’s guess for Middle age	Zhuang (Wuming)	Meaning
tɕie ⁵¹	*kɕi	kla:i ⁵	‘boundary’
tɕi ²¹⁴	*kɕi	klai ⁵	‘animal egg’
tɕiau ³⁵	*kau	kla:u ⁴	‘stir’
tɕiau ⁵⁵	*kɕiɛu	klau ¹	‘beautiful’
tɕiau ²¹⁴	*kɔk	klau ³	‘horn’
tɕian ⁵⁵	*kæn	kla:n ¹	‘classifier for house’
tɕia ²¹⁴	*kap	klap ⁷	‘first’
tɕi ³⁵	*kɕiɔp	klap ⁷	‘catch’
tɕia ⁵⁵	*ka	kla ¹	‘add’
tɕian ⁵⁵	*kɕiɔŋ	kle:ŋ ¹	‘stiff’
tɕian ²¹⁴	*kɔŋ	kla:ŋ ³	‘speak’

Chart C. Jianmu and Zhuang initial consonant clusters

Zhuang has had close contact with Chinese, and the two languages share this sound law. In Chart C we see that the initial consonant clusters of Zhuang correspond to the Middle Age Chinese ‘k’. So presumably there were many words in Ancient Chinese with initial consonant clusters. However, not all Jianmu words contained initial clusters in ancient times, only words with a following vowel ‘i’ would have had clusters. Words having Jianmu preceding the vowel ‘y’ did not have clusters. See chart D

Jianmu words	Zhuang (Wuming)	Meaning
tɕy ²¹⁴	kaw ³	‘hold up’
tɕy ⁵⁵	kaw ¹	‘chariot’
tɕy ⁵¹	kaw ⁵	‘saw’
tɕy ⁵¹	kaw ⁵	‘sentence’
tɕye ⁵⁵	ki:t ⁷	‘decide’
tɕyn ⁵⁵	kin ⁶	‘army’
tɕyen ²¹⁴	ki:n ³	‘roll up’

Chart D. Jianmu ‘y’ and Zhuang

Therefore we see that the Jianmu preceding ‘i’ in ancient times, contained a consonant cluster. So the three Mon-Khmer words containing ‘kl’ are related to Jianmu in modern Chinese words which retain the vowel ‘i’: [tɕian⁵⁵], [tɕian²¹⁴], and [tɕiau²¹⁴], and the ‘k’ as in Cantonese [kɔŋ⁴⁴], [kɔŋ⁵⁵] and [ka:u³⁵]. (See Chart B). The Mon-Khmer word *kliau* ‘stir’ still keeps the ‘i’ following the initial ‘kl’.

4. Historical contacts between Pu and Ancient China

The historical contact between Mon-Khmer people and Chinese people can also confirm our view. The ancestors of the Mon-Khmer people were the Pu, an ancient clan who were distributed over the Changjiang River valley during the Shang dynasty (16th century B.C.-11th century B.C.) and later on lived scattered throughout Sichuan, Guizhou and Yunnan provinces.

Pu had close contacts with the Han people as early as remote antiquity. According to historical records, Pu paid tribute to King Tang of the Shang Dynasty with pearl and gems about the 16th century B. C. And the Pu together with King Wu of the Zhou Dynasty, joined the Meiyue campaign to wipe out the Shang about the 11th century B.C.,

Pu and Jun attacked Chu state in 611 B.C., and the Chu navy struck a vindictive blow against Pu in 523 B.C. After that many of the Pu clans were swallowed up by the Chu. By the time of the Three Kingdoms, the Pu lived in the south of the kingdom of Shu Han (221 A.D.-263 A.D.) and paid tribute to the Shu king. During the Tang dynasty, Pu paid tribute to the Tang royal court. Historically, Pu often paid tribute to the Central Plains imperial court.

It is thus clear that ancient Mon-Khmer people have been keeping in touch with Han people since the Shang dynasty. Nations contacting each other necessarily leads to their languages influencing each other. Therefore these Mon-Khmer languages were certainly affected by the conquering Chinese before the Qin dynasty (221 B.C - 207 B.C.) when the initial clusters such as *pl* and *kl* still existed in ancient Chinese, and it is then that the words with the consonant clusters: *kloy*, *klay* and *kliaw*⁵¹ in Mon-Khmer languages were borrowed from remote-age Chinese.

5. Summary

In summary, modern local Mon-Khmer data, weighed together with modern oral Cantonese data, modern Zhuang data, and Jianmu data, yield a consistent picture of the the original Jianmu pronunciation, and its changes. Add to this the historical records of Pu/Han cultural and political interaction under heavy Han dominance. This gives a picture of a group of culturally important words interacting orally around the 2nd century B.C., and marked with a Jianmu symbol from Han Chinese, influencing the Pu (Mon-Khmer) people and language.

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ED: This multifaceted Jianmu is tantalizingly reminiscent of the southeast Asian register complex.

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