Sino-Tibetan *Vulva

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Abstract
This paper attempts the megalocomparison of the lexeme vulva across a number of languages distributed throughout East and Southeast Asia. The canonical syllable of Sino-Tibetan includes a possible prefix plus root; modern vulva forms from Sinitic and Tibeto-Burman languages suggest their historical source was a bi-syllabic morpheme which later split into two independent roots in some languages. The author tracks the surface similarities of forms in Sinitic and Tibeto-Burman languages which lead him to propose Sino-Tibetan *dzu(k) mat and Proto-Chinese *tsɿ mat (and several variant proto-roots). These roots are based on modern forms from two major southern Sinitic languages, Min tsi1 mai1 and Kejia tςɿ1 piet7, and such Tibeto-Burman languages as Written Burmese tʃok pat and Northern Hpun (Meyaw) tςɿ mæʔ, zɔʔ mɔ. The author suggests that Mandarin tςɿ1 pa9 "penis" also shares the same historical source but has undergone a process of phonetic attrition and semantic flip-flop. Many vulva forms distributed across genetically related and unrelated languages of Southeast Asia and Japan appear to be related either as cognates or contact loans. The Appendix listing forms from many languages and dialects of this broad geographical area concludes the paper.

1. Introduction
This paper has three purposes: the main one is to propose a "reconstruction" for the Sino-Tibetan lexeme vulva based on the megalocomparison of vulva forms from many Sinitic and Tibeto-Burman languages. To do this I have combined Greenberg’s multilateral comparison and "... a method that looks at everything at once ... at many languages across a few words" (Greenberg 1987:23), with Buck’s technique of sorting modern...
forms by their Indo-European etyina (Buck 1949). My second purpose is much more modest: to revise Stimson’s (1966) Middle Chinese reconstruction by drawing upon forms from a number of southern Chinese dialects which have since become available. And third, taking a cue from Matisoff’s stimulating discussion of megalocomparison (1990), I have decided that while I was in the “hothouse homogenizing atmosphere of Southeast Asia” (Matisoff 1983:63) I might as well extend my net of megalocomparison and pull in phonosemantically similar forms from Benedict’s Japanese/Austro-Tai family.

For Proto-Sino-Tibetan vulva I propose the reconstruction *dzuk mat; in addition, I propose several variant roots (for the proto-period and later), namely, *dzu mat, *dzuk, *dzu, *dzuk b(j)e’t, *dzu b(j)e’t, *bat, *b(j)e’t. I do not claim that I have “reconstructed” these roots because my demonstration of correspondences between initials and vowels of the proto-roots and their modern forms is both limited and tentative. In speculating on what the phonetic shapes of these roots looked like, I have been mainly guided by the modern Sinitic material; however, in examining roots reconstructed by Tibeto-Burmanists who have worked out the sound correspondences, I have happily found a high degree of phonetic congruence between their roots and mine. What is unique about my “reconstruction” is— that I have gone back one step before Tibeto-Burman.

*bat in proposing a bilabial nasal stop initial for the root, i.e. *mat, from which the Tibeto-Burman and Sinitic reflexes of m-, n-, p-, ph-, h- are derived. The evidence for *m- comes mainly from modern Min on the Sinitic side and Northern Hpun (Mgyaw) on the Tibeto-Burman side. The Appendix: Proto-Sino-Tibetan *Vulva at the end of this paper classifies the modern forms for vulva in a number of Sino-Tibetan languages (as well as some Austro-Tai languages which appear to have Sino-Tibetan loans) under their reconstructed roots.

At the outset, I would like to set forth clearly three points that have guided my thinking in this study of the historical development of vulva in Sino-Tibetan languages. First, in devising one Sino-Tibetan root from which all the forms in the modern Chinese dialects and many forms in the Tibeto-Burman languages may be derived, I have in effect based the root on a unification theory which in itself may make it suspect. However, I have done this only in order to have a point from which to begin. The results of this study are very tentative, and where revisions are called for, I will gladly make them.

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2 Bauer 1988, now a companion piece to the present paper, first applied this combined procedure to the lexemes tongue and lick. Let me assure anyone who may think the contrary that for now I see no special ties between this pair of lexemes and vulva. To pinch an old pun from Matisoff (Benedict 1979:31), I’m no cunning linguist; the juxtaposition has been pure, coincidental.
Second, I believe every word has a history of its own. This is not meant to imply that a particular word in the course of its historical development has defied regular sound laws. But I do not think it is surprising if a particular word has been affected by some sound changes but not others. Furthermore, we cannot rule out the possibility that a particular historical development is unique (cf. Matlack 1972b:276). What I am saying is that we have no way of knowing all the facts about the historical development of a word so that the relationship between the modern reflex and its etymon may not be readily apparent. I have in mind the southern Sinitic forms of Min-Hongkong tsi¹ mai¹, Min-Xiamen tsi¹ bai¹, Kefa-Sixian tsi¹ piət⁷, and Yue-Hongkong hai¹; phonetically divergent as these forms are on the surface, I believe that all of them ultimately descend from the same historical source.

And third, I believe there is no area of the lexicon that is immune to lexical replacement — bodypart terms are no exception.³ The notion of a basic vocabulary which of course includes terms for the bodyparts is a convenient heuristic device of the linguist. It helpfully distinguishes between relatively stable areas of vocabulary, such as bodypart terms and pronouns, and other areas where lexical expansion is commonly observed, such as the names of culturally-transmitted items which are simply added to the vocabulary and do not necessarily replace already existing terms. I think we need to distinguish between lexical replacement and lexical expansion; two processes which are both termed “borrowing.”

A variety of situations bring speakers of different languages into contact, and as a result speakers of Language A may learn an equivalent bodypart term from Language B. Speakers of Language A may know two words for the same thing and may use both terms in variation; eventually, however, the form from B may displace the term in A if the speakers feel no need for having two ways to refer to the same thing.⁴ Further, it should go without saying that lexical replacement can take place both among genetically related and genetically unrelated languages. That two languages

³ Japanese speakers have borrowed English pents as pentsu which is used by men as often as the native word chinko (Solt 1982:78). Several languages of the Middle East have borrowed Arabic kus ‘vulva’: Israeli Hebrew kus is the vulgar slang word (Petrucci 1986:104); cf. Afghan Persian kos, Baluchi kus (Nawata 1981:34), Mazandarani kes, Persian kos (Nawata 1984:29). Megalocomparativists, note Benedict’s S-T root *bat and Hebrew pot ‘vulva’ (Petrucci 1986:69).

⁴ E.g. in bilingual families in which children grow up hearing the mother and father speak different languages; or in societies which deliberately use a foreign language in some domain, e.g. English as the vogue language of Japanese advertising. There are also language contact situations in which one ethnolinguistic group dominates another but language influence can move in either direction: English as the pre- eminent language of international business in the British colony of Hong Kong has strongly influenced both Cantonese phonology and vocabulary; on the other hand, the close but hostile contact between Jews and Arabs in Israel finds Hebrew absorbing vocabulary from Arabic.
are genetically unrelated does not mean there can be no relationships between their vocabularies — even if the forms are not genetic cognates, they may still be linked as loanwords. In some of the non-Tibeto-Burman languages of East and Southeast Asia terms for ‘vulva’ appear to be contact loans from Sino-Tibetan languages.

2.1 Previously-reconstructed Sino-Tibetan and Tibeto-Burman roots

Benedict (n.d.a:3) has reconstructed Sino-Tibetan *(s-)ba(-t) vulva derived from *(s-)bet 'hide/hidden' which is based on Written Tibetan sbé ál-pa, sba 'hide, conceal' (Jäschke 1985:404) and sbá-ba 'privy parts, pudenda' (403). He has connected this root to Proto-Chinese via *pǎo/puo 'hide oneself: escape' (GS #102d, Karlgren 1966:153) which he believes is derived from *s-baÁ. Benedict’s source of modern Chinese dialect forms (he cites Hakka pìet8 and Min-Klenyang pìe7) is Proto-Chinese *(s-)bi et vulva from an earlier Sino-Tibetan *(s-)bat (n.d.a:4).

[Cf. Benedict 1988:39 which listed a more phonetically detailed root *b'i t for Chinese and associated it with 躲; however, this Chinese character seems to have a relatively recent history: according to Stimson 1966:292, the graph first appeared in a dictionary of the late 17th century].

If we hypothesize a connection between Benedict’s ST root *s-bat and Min-Xiamen tsí bai, this comparison raises several questions: (1) Can we link ST *s- with the initial syllable tsí1? (2) Can we derive Modern Min b- from ST *b-? (3) Can we derive modern Min -ai from ST *-at? My answers to these questions are as follows: (1) At the proto-ST level I prefer a full prefixal syllable *dzu from which can be derived proto-Chinese *tsí and Min tsí1. (2) In the history of the Min dialects modern b- initial has derived from Middle Chinese (and presumably earlier) *m-; that is, *m- underwent a process of denasalization. To accommodate Min I have proposed that proto-Chinese *mat > proto-Min *mai > modern Min bai. (3) At the moment I cannot point to any other lexical items in Min to demonstrate that one of the sources of proto-Min -aí has been proto-Chinese *-at; and the lack of such evidence may mean that this correspondence is unique. However, as we shall see below in section 3.1. comparable forms in Kejia dialects clearly indicate that the etymon’s rhyme had a -t ending.

On the Tibeto-Burman side, previous reconstructions include: Burmese-Lolo *džuk (Benedict 1972:53), Lolo-Burmese *b(j)et (Matisoff 1972a:83) and *b(j)it (Thurgood 1974:105),5 Tibeto-Burman *hái,

5 Originally reconstructed as b(y)et and b(y)it, these roots are rewritten with j as the palatal glide.