mắt cá: FROM "FISHES' EYES" TO "ANKLEBONES": A VIETNAMESE CALQUE?

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'mắt cá là cái gì' (nôm= 相鰓 當鰓): "what are fishes' eyes?", asks Vietnamese (VN). The earliest record so far discovered in answer is Alexandre de Rhodes' Dictionarium entry (1651:456): 'mắt cá: artelho do pé: talus, i.', in which the Latin talus means 'ankle, anklebone'. Legrand de la Liraye (1874:150b) translates it as 'cheville du pied', Taberd (1877: 271a) as 'Oculus piscis; malleoli', while Ravier (1880:706a) notes 'malleolus #4,mắt cá (ndi chân tay)' (=place of the feet/legs and hands/arms). Cúc (1897:86b) describes it as 'fleshed bone swelling on both sides of the foot at the point where it joins the leg'; Tự Đức (1898:q.3, 3a4, p.51 = p.216, 1.19) uses it cryptically to translate the Chinese character 椐 huĩ 'ankle' (> 'anklebone'), huĩ in Modern Standard Chinese (=phòng hùa/MSC). Again, Bonet (1899:407a) records it as 'cheville du pied; litt. œil de poisson', Huệ (1937:55a, 2) repeating it as 'cheville du pied, cor, chevillon', while Trù (1960:299b) defines it as 'heads of bones jutting out at the neck of legs (=ankle) (qv. Trù 1970:II, 894a) and the Hợi Khai Trị (1968:337b) tells us that it is 'the head of a bone budding out near the neck of the leg' (=i.e. the ankle), hence 'the anklebone'.

This seems to be highly figurative language, a descriptive pun (qqv. Emeneau 1947; Hoạ 1955; Davidson 1978:37ff., 1986a:354, n.37), for to find a fish's eye, probably rather dead in appearance, looking up at you from the anklebone of a person's leg, bulging out dull, then whitish as it stretches from where it peaks to the darker skin surrounding it on legs that have travelled in fields of paddy, sea-salt, or whatever else, in a Vietnamese-style climate, will certainly provide yet another superb and humorous expression of the impression intended, since the Vietnamese have long associated their vital environment with all the other natural symbolism that they envisage (e.g. Davidson 1978).

Such visual association (qv. n.3), is frequently complemented by word-play afforded by the opportunities of homophony. An encounter is the Modern Mon (NM)/môt coig/ 'anklebone' (lit. 'eye of the elephant'; Shorto 1962:170b môt coig; ref. p.96b coig' 'elephant'), while in inscriptive language one finds cìn²/cìn/ n. 'elephant' (Shorto 1971:98) and jùi/jun/ 'lower limb' (ibíd.,l25), where a mat²/mot/ n. 'eye' (ibíd.,285) plus jùi would have provided us with the expected
Mon-Khmer (MK) and Malayo-Polynesian (MP) 'eye of the leg' for an 'anklebone'! This 'confusion' may well have stemmed from, or led to, folk-etymology and folk taxonomy -- an investigation lying in wait -- but it further emphasizes the point already made of the desire for the use of figurative language and especially for descriptive punning.

Parts of the body are, however, often not identified with any precision in basic and vernacular Vietnamese language, that is, language which excludes or may not include the use of the specific, pointed Hán-Việt (HV) vocabulary found in the literary language of the educated élite, and which is also 'pre-modern', that is, prior to the introduction of western, scientific and other specialist vocabulary. A general area of the body may be referred to, but not a specific part of it, by a single, special word. So, chân (var. chậm, chủ) stands broadly for both 'leg' and 'foot', tay for 'arm' and 'hand', while together chân tay means 'limbs'. When an anatomical feature does captivate attention and is accorded a specific term, structural or functional perception of it is a common reason for the formation of the word or words describing it. So, many South-East Asian languages have captured in their vocabularies' imagination the concept of the ankle or wrist as the 'neck' of the leg or arm and the anklebone as the 'eye' of the leg/foot even though in actuality it is not a part of the ankle itself but a swelling out on both sides of the lower end of the two leg bones (tibia and fibula) at the point at which they articulate with the tarsal bones (qv. Căa 1987:86b).

Naturally, words for 'hands' and 'arms', 'feet' and 'legs' may well have changed in the language families that inhabit South-East Asia, China, South Asia, Oceania and other related areas as their languages developed from the early through to the modern forms, but the phonetic similarity is even now often noticeable. The same is also evident for the words for the 'eye' (e.g. Shorto 1971:285, i.a.) since one finds links between the Sino-Tibetan, Sino-Tai, Austroasiatic and Austro-nesian forms in both their phonetics and the semantic functions performed. So, as in Vietnamese we have an 'arm' tay, its 'neck' cổ becomes immediately recognizable as the 'wrist' cổ tay, as does the leg's 'neck' become an 'ankle' cổ chân (e.g. Gouin 1957:181b). Other examples are numerous (qv. n.8 below) but, especially when we find the 'board, table' (bàn cf. van 'plank') helping to structure a 'hand' bàn tay or 'foot' bàn chân, why do we not 'eye' the 'leg' (mắt chân) to make an 'anklebone'? After all, we have already met the partially successful Modern Mon attempt of mòt coiç and the Malay mata kaki. Bahnarn provides us with mät jông 'cheville du pied' (Dourisbourne 1899:203; cf. Katsu manîst, manîit, identified as mät cê in the Vietnamese equivalents but translated as 'ankle' in the English (Costello 1971:27, 30) and probably from ma 'eye', cf. katam (loc. att.), while Sedang gives us mæ cheăng 'ankle' (lit. 'eye

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of the leg/foot') and 月至 'wrist' (Smith 1962:15-16) and we can note en passant the Chrau ḳ̀ng 'leg, foot' (Thomas 1966:24). Unfortunately with no further relevant data. Going south in present-day Vietnamese territory, we discover more support from the Cham mtā takāi (cf. takan takay, Moussay 1971:379b 'cheville du pied'; cf. ibid., 224 mtā le 'cheville') with the other common uses of the 'eye/face' word as 'node, joint', etc. The same occurs in Nicobarese (Roepsforff 1884:78, 122, 149, mathōu, --okloaka-la; --olarat, etc.; cf. Man 1896-9:6, 118a).

This Vietnamese 'neck' cò of the 'arm' or 'leg', joining them to 'hands' or 'feet', finds many other Mon-Khmer language equivalents, two directly apparent examples being Modern Khmer ḳō: day 'wrist', ḳō: cving 'ankle' (Jacob 1971:1) and Modern Mon ḳhè:ng 'ankle', ḳhè: toa 'wrist' (Shorto 1962:53a). Of immediate interest, therefore, and suggestively cognate is the Lao khā: thào 'ankle' (lit. joint of the foot) (Kerr 1972:129b; cf. ibid., 118b khā:), which is supported by the Modern Standard Thai (MST) khoS thaaW 'ankle'; lit. joint of the foot' (not 'leg', khoa, (n.b. Li 1977:213, §10.6.29 among other entries, e.g. §2.23, 14.11.4, etc.) -- with a secondary vernacular teav tum (thaaW) 'eye of the node (of the foot)' ->'anklebone'. Thus, the possibility of 'link' cognates -- joint-neck-tibia-shin -- keeps springing to mind. Indeed, there is an impression of 'joining, uniting, linking' and of 'reaching, attaining, going to' (see GSR 675a-d) e.g. *gēb/zhī ho [=MSC hē] encouraged by the noun character for 'neck' which one also finds as Hán-Việt, and in the MSC compound kilou 'skeleton', (= khoS lāu; cf. MSC gūgē 'ibid.' =HV cot cach). Additionally, there is the Vietnamese word for 'joint'; physical articulation khoS hā: (->'bone-joint' = ~ xūbcng), which strongly suggests a relation between it and the Vietnamese hōc cò 'unite, etc.', joining things together.

Reverting in this context to a possibly pre-sinitic word (or a very early Chinese loan?) preserved in present-day Chinese territory, one finds the MSC jiāo (GSR 1166p *k'og/ k'au/kiao 'tibia'; =?HV ciao); its variant character used for 'joint' and presented in Ningpo dialect as gao (Morrison 1876:20b), ngaü in Swatow (Gibson 1886:107c; cf. VN ngaü hōp 'join again' =?Tie-chiu/Hokkien) and its parallel MSC jing e.g. jingKa 靜骨 'shinbone' (>tibia'; (cf. GSR 831k. *g'ien/giēng/hing 'leg, shank (Lunyü)'), as well as the two pronunciations for 'neck' in MSC gēn̄g/jing (GSR 831n. *k'ēng/ k'iang/king, and *g'ēng/g'ian/g'ing... (Tso), all of which are related, at least phonetically. Hence the pronunciations for the word for 'neck' in Vietnamese cò, the Thai khoS, Lao khā:, a large number of Mon-Khmer languages (qv. Shorto 1971:52), and Archaic Chinese *k'og (GSR 1166p), thrust cognacy before us. The image of an articulated (=joint), tube-like connection of varying lengths between the torso and its ending appendages does, of course, bring the possible linked, root-origins of such words together, while the closeness in pronunciation of the 'leg' word
in a range of South Eastern Chinese dialects (qv. Bauer 1987),

\[ \text{e.g. } \text{kj\u00e2k} \text{ (=HV k\u00f4\u00e6c, also read k\u00f4\u00e6c) giving rise to } \text{goe} \]

'base, foot (of a tree)' \[ \text{[n\u00e1m ph\u00e0]} \] (Tr\u00eau 1960:46a) reconstructed

as Archaic Chinese *kj\u00e2k (GSR 776g-h), forcefully implies a pre-

sinitic origin of the word that ends up as the Chinese character

\[ \text{脚 (MSC ju\u00e9, ji\u0111o).} \]

But here the Vietnamese \[ \text{m\u00e1t c\u01b0} \] 'anklebone' remains

distinctly in the forefront of one's mind. If the base word

\[ \text{ch\u00e2n 'leg, foot' which qualified other associated ideas giving} \]

us words like 'ankle', 'foot', 'toe', 'toenail', 'heel', etc.,

(qv. n.8 below) fulfills its purpose, then why does an 'anklebone'

suddenly turn from the 'eye' of the leg' into a 'fish's eye'?

Naturally, in a Vietnamese language situation such as this, one

looks to the Chinese reservoir of vocabulary for help in solving

the problem. In Archaic and in Ancient Chinese one does not find

the 'anklebone' separately listed, one finds the 'ankle'

\[ \text{GSR 351j. } \text{*g'\u0111warp_/hua ankle (Li) = MSC h\u00eau, h\u0101i.} \]

the Hán-

Viêtn reading for which is h\u0101\u1edd (Thiêu Chùa 1966: 660a)\[1\]

but which is

intriguingly identified as an 'anklebone' (ibid.), and clearly

recorded as such in the Tu Bu (1898:q.3, 3a, p.51

\[ \text{=p.226, 1.19 as 'kh\u00e0c m\u00e1t c\u01b0'} \] while the MSC gives us h\u00eau for

'ankle' and h\u0101\u1edd (var. jixi\u1ebf, ju\u1ed7\u00e1n) while the Nongpo ky\u1ed7h tsang

'ankle' (cf. kyi\u1ed7h gao 'ankle-joint', Morrison 1876:20b)

relates directly to a Hakka 'kik m\u00eau tsang 'heel', and the Hakka

'ankle' kik m\u00eau m\u00e1t c\u01b0 (cf. kik m\u00e1t, MacIver 1926: 288b) connects

well with the Shanghai ky\u1ed7k m\u00e1t. Yet, focusing on

the 'eye' as the centre of attention in this 'joint', this

'link', strikingly important is the awareness of the 'eye'

of the 'leg', foot', in Southern, and in particular in South Eastern

Chinese dialects. There is Cantonese ke\u0111 nga\u0144m (kwut

'ankle(bone)' (qv. MSC, above; cf. MacIver 1926:344b), Hakka khe-

kwut 'the anklebone'), Lungtu kha\u0101 m\u00eau, F\u00f3zh\u00f4u k\u00e1 ng\u00eau m\u00e1t

\[ \text{目 (=the leg [joint]s ox's eye)! (MacIver 1929:1021)}, \]

in the

Swatow kha-m\u00e1t 'anklebone' (and variants, Lechler 1883:9) and the

Amoy 'ankle' k'a b\u00e0k (liter. kik bok, kha-bak, kis' bok; cf. C.


The thought came to my mind of a word of pre-sinitic origin

preserved in what are termed South Eastern Chinese dialects and

then spurred into a calque by the creative imagination of the

Vietnamese because it rhymed descriptively with the phonetic and

thence the visual awareness of a 'fish's 'eye' (m\u00e1t c\u01b0 =*kh\u00e0m

m\u00e1t). And, almost instinctively one senses that the Hokkien

(Hkn.=F\u00f3zh\u00f4u) dialects offer the greatest suggestions. Among

them, I think that Tie-chiu (=Chaozhou) enlivens us. In it we

find m\u00e1t c\u01b0 'eye' (Goddard 1883:103a)\[19\] and k'a 'foot' (ibid.,

63a), the tone, pitch and contour of whose pronunciation conform

well with the Vietnamese m\u00e1t c\u01b0, strengthening the argument since

it was the speakers of Tie-chiu who made up the largest Chinese