“EAT”, “ECLIPSE” and “ADORN”: Cognates in Chinese

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This essay addresses the need for a radical departure in the making of Chinese-English dictionaries. What is notably missing from current dictionaries, as well as from serious western works in Chinese linguistics, such as Karlgren’s Grammata Serica, is the ability to cross reference the key words and synonyms used in the Chinese lexicographic sources. This essay particularly attempts to demonstrate the importance of tracing the semantics of a word family by examining the trail of synonyms and reformulating the underlying semantics accordingly. Additionally, this essay stresses the importance of understanding and using traditional Chinese lexicographic sources. Computer databases offer a convenient means for entering Chinese synonyms and definitions in a romanized ASCII format, along with easy and quick access to them. The Old and Middle Chinese forms used here are a proposed “logical” and ASCII substitution for Karlgren’s ad hoc and diacritical-laden “reconstruction”.

Bernhard Karlgren’s Grammata Serica Recensa (GSR) lists a series (GSR 921) of Chinese characters in which ⼧ shih² [<$dhjok “to eat”] is the “phonic element.” One of these (GSR 921e), 餐 ssu4 [<$dzuyok “to feed”] is apparently the causative form of the verb: “feed”, “cause to eat”. The modern variant of the character for “to feed” 餐 (Fig. 1, line 3) should appear at GSR 972, but is apparently omitted because it lacks historical interest. The terse variant of “to feed” is identical to the character for “to eat.” The double reading (*dhjok vs. *dzuyok) for this character indicates that the pronunciation was grammatically, though not necessarily graphically, distinguished. Chu Chünszhe says that the terse variant serves as a “loan.” He cites the title phrase, “The rites of the coenarch feeding [:feasting] the grandees”, from the Yili (“Community Rites”) as an example of the loan (Fig. 1, lines 1-3).

儀禮:公食大夫禮.
朱駿聲, 說文通訓定聲:
食假借為餲.字亦作饋.
經典釋文:食本作饋.
餲聲字:飾餲飾.
說文解字:飾, 參也, 參, 鬱也. 段玉裁注:飾今字, 許有飾無說.
飾, 有斯從刀, 段玉裁聲.

Figure 1
Since the causative form in this text is not graphically distinguished, and since no one assumes that the coenarchs were cannibals, the Chingtien Shihwen comment (Fig. 1, lines 4) noted by Karlgren and cited by Chu (that is, that the character was originally written in full form in the Yü) is of dubious significance. In fact the full-form character for “feed” hardly merits serious consideration, except for the fact that it is ostensibly the “phonetic element” in the following characters (Fig. 1, line 5):

- 饰 shih⁴ “to adorn, ornament” [<_sjysk] (GSR 921h)
- 饲 shih² “to eclipse” [<_dhysk] (GSR 921d)
- 饷 chih⁴ “to strengthen” [<_thyysk] (GSR 921g).

According to Karlgren, shih² “to eclipse” is the semantic extension of the basic meaning, “to eat up gradually”, when the object of the verb is the sun or moon: “(eating of sun or moon:) eclipse”. In Analytic Dictionary of Chinese (ADC 891) Karlgren notes that shih² “eclipse”, is “etymologically the same word as shih² “eat”, [graphically] enlarged by [dictionary classifier radical 142, “entomoid, insect”]”. As for the rest, however, Karlgren (ADC 815) says that ssu⁴ “to feed”, is simply “phonetic in” shih⁴ “to adorn”, and chih⁴ “to strengthen”. There is no attempt in ADC or GSR to interpret or extend the semantics in order to derive or justify the translations of these words. Why, in any case, should we even suspect a semantic affinity between such diverse words as ‘EAT’ and ‘ADORN’?

While I am not proposing that all characters having identical “phonetic elements” are etymologically related, we need to examine each case carefully and research the lexicographic data for any clues which suggest a subtle semantic thread or a broader basic meaning capable of underlying and including the several senses which have already been adduced. It is especially gratifying, in the course of such investigations, to find an Indo-European word family (or two), hitherto overlooked, which happily expresses much the same “root and branch” meanings as that of the Chinese. In the case of shih⁴ “to adorn”, the etymological connection is rather obvious once we extend our search from the world of words in translation to the universe of SIE (Sino-Indo-European) comparative etymology.

The Shuowen (SW) dictionary (121 A.D.) defines shih⁴ “adorn”, by shua “scrape clear, brush” (cf. 言 GSR 298), and vice versa. Shua “brush” is itself the “abbreviated phonetic” in shua “to scrape”, and the latter is defined by SW as 言 kua “scrape, polish” (GSR 302n). The post-classical variant of shih⁴ “adorn”, according to the SW commentator Tuan Yû-ts’ai, is 曰 shih⁴ “to wipe” (GSR 918k). The purpose of wiping, brushing or polishing, notes Tuan, is to remove dirt and bring out the luster of something. In fact, “to wipe” is also the
basic meaning of shūh^4 “adorn”, according to Tuan! Thus Tuan objects to substituting shūh^4 “to wipe” (GSR 918k), for shūh^4 “wipe, adorn” (GSR 921h), in the classics. He argues that the latter should be understood in its more basic meaning, “to wipe”; and, after all, he notes, the character still has the wash-wipe “cloth” as its semantic classifier (radical 50)!

The Shūhming (SM: “Explanation of Names”) defines shūh^4 [“adorn"] by shūh^4 “to wipe”, and explains that “things which are dirty are wiped on the surface to make them bright.” By extension, “things which are illuminated by other things is like adding ornate patterns to unadorned substance” (Fig. 1, lines 13-16). Commenting on shua, “brush”, Tuan says that “to be wiped clean and bright” is extended to mean “ornately embellished” or “adorned” (Fig. 1, lines 16-20).

Closely parallel to the semantics of shūh^4 “wipe, adorn”, is English terse: “wiped, brushed, smoothed” [OED sense 1], which has been extended to mean “polite, polished, cultured” [OED sense 2, obsolete]. Terse, according to Webster’s Third (W3), originally meant “freed of debris or roughness”, and derives from Latin (L) tersus “clean, neat”; ultimately from tergere “to rub off, wipe”. Latin tergere, according to W3, is also akin to Latin terere “to rub,” and Greek trogeo “to gnaw.” Tersion, according to a 1704 lexicon cited by the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), means “wiping or cleaning the outside of any body”. Also related to terse, via L tergere, is detergent, a cleansing agent. However, while shūh^4 “wipe, adorn,” is sometimes extended to mean surface show, disguise or deception (to “whitewash” or conceal rather than reveal), the semantics of terse reverts back to pithy unadorned substance, and refers to a style of language shorn of superfluity and verbal redundancy. Even so, shūh^4 “adorn,” like terse, has become a term of art, as opposed to the more basic meaning, “to wipe.” The analogy is somewhat parallel to terse, “polished, brief,” as opposed to deterge, “to cleanse”.

Under the entry for terse, Webster’s Third New International Dictionary (W3) says L tergere “to rub off, wipe,” is “akin to” L terere “to rub.” The American Heritage Dictionary (AHD), on the other hand, says L tergere, “to wipe,” is of obscure origin. AHD traces L terere to the IE root *ter-, “to rub, turn.” If W3 is correct, we might propose a suffixed form *ter-g- (by analogy to *dher- “muddy, dark”, with suffixed form *dher-g-, whence Germanic *derk- and English dark).
W3, as well as Partridge's Origins, also brings termite, "wood-eating worm," into this word family. According to Chu, *shth*2 [<*dhjyek “to eat up gradually"] has the "insect" classifier (radical 142) precisely because it takes its basic meaning from the eating habits of termites. Its usage with respect to solar and lunar eclipses, according to Chu, is an extension (or trope) of this basic meaning (Fig. 2, lines 1-3). The *tu*4 [ <*tâg “grubs in wood” GSR 795r] noted by Chu is in fact defined by SW and Tuan (Fig. 2, lines 4-6) as precisely the "wood-eating worm": the termite! It is quite possible that *tâg, “wood-eating worm, termite”, is also etymologically affiliated with this word family, as an a-grade variant; but so far we lack systematic information on vowel-grade variants in Chinese etymology.

Latin terere “to rub, grind," is ultimately akin to the following English words: attrition, trite, contrite, detriment, and triturate. Triturate is the obvious choice for the word we customarily translate as “(to) eat”. OED says triturate means "to reduce to fine particles or powder by rubbing, bruising, pounding, crushing or grinding; to comminute, pulverize; also, to mix (solids, or a solid and liquid) in this way." As a noun, triturate is simply a triturated substance. Perhaps no other word expresses so well Tuan’s explanation of the character as a collection (or mixture) of grains to form foods; in other words, a triturate of cereal grains. Meal [<* IE *mēl-, “to crush, grind"] is also an ideal translation for the noun.

With these basic meanings in mind, the SW explanation of the character for "eclipse" is quite clear. *Dhjyek “triturate", is both semantically significant and "also phonetic". It is, in other words, etymonic. Tuan takes the etymological argument one step further by noting that we could say that *sjyek “terse, polished”, is the "abbreviated phonetic" in "eclipse"; thereby asserting the kinship of all three words (Fig. 2, line 9). The semantics involved in the case of an eclipse of the heavenly bodies, as with the action of termites on wood, is apparently quite close to that of attrition. Note, however, that the SW definition (Fig. 2, line 7) is “to suffer injury, to be wounded"! The semantic transition is not difficult. Once we examine the synonyms and cognates of triturate it is readily apparent. Bruise is a synonym of triturate, according to