

How dull can you get?: *buttock* and *heel* in Sino-Tibetan

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As I was deep into the revisions of the “nether regions” of Chapter Four (“The Outer Body”) of Volume I (*Body-part Terminology*) of the *Sino-Tibetan Etymological Dictionary and Thesaurus* (STEDT) recently—i.e., the LOWER BACK / HIPS / BUTTOCKS / LOINS area—the outlines of a new Proto-Tibeto-Burman (PTB) and Proto-Sino-Tibetan (PST) etymon began to emerge. It quickly became apparent that the semantic ramifications of this root extend well beyond the buttocks in the narrow sense. One of the more *interesting* of these associations involves, oxymoronically enough, the concept of *dullness*.

1.0 ***-tun** ✕ ***-tin** BUTTOCK / HEEL / DULL

1.1 BUTTOCK

First, a couple of words for *buttock* in Kamarupan languages:

Meithei **məthun**¹

Abor-Miri **ko-dun**

A highly probable cognate in a Central Loloish language, Lisu, demonstrates that this is a general TB root:

Lisu **khi**²¹ **du**²¹ ‘buttock’

The first syllable here means ‘excrement’ (< PTB ***kləy**: STC #125), though this is no objection to maintaining that the core meaning of the second syllable is ‘buttocks’ and not ‘anus’. The first syllable is merely a metonymic clue to the general anatomical area. (Analogously, the original meaning of the Lahu word **qhê-qhə**, literally “shit-hole”, must obviously have been ‘anus’, but it has long since been generalized to mean ‘buttocks; rear end’, and now even neologistically to refer to the rear of a car or the tail of an airplane.)

¹ In order to avoid cluttering this little paper with references, the sources of most cited forms are not indicated. They are all to be found in the STEDT database.

Jingpho has an obviously related form, but with *-i-* vocalism, and a sibilant prefix (rather than a nasal one as in Meithei):

Jingpho **ṣətɪn** 'buttocks'

This *-u- ɹ -i-* alternation is one of the best-attested variational patterns in Tibeto-Burman.²

A cognate immediately suggests itself on the Chinese side: the first syllable of Mandarin **tún-bù** 'buttocks'³:

臀 or **臀** [GSR 429b-c] OC ***d'wən** / MC **d'uən** / [Baxter⁴] OC ***dɔ̃n**

尻 [GSR 429a]⁵ OC ***d'wən** / MC **d'uən** / [Baxter] OC ***dɔ̃n**

Also probably related is this morpheme from the same phonetic series:

殿 [GSR 429d] OC ***tɪən** / MC **tien-** / [Baxter] OC ***dɔ̃n**
'rear (of an army)'⁶

If these two Chinese morphemes are indeed allofams, it is interesting to note that Karlgren's reconstructions make it look as if Chinese displays the same back/front (or labialized/palatalized) vowel alternation in this root as does TB; while Baxter, not recognizing prelabialized vowels or a medial **-i-* in Division IV, reconstructs an invariant Old Chinese rhyme for all the characters in this group. Be that as it may, the case for cognacy with the TB forms cited above and below seems strong, both phonologically and semantically.

We have thus set up this root for PTB/PST as STEDT Etymon #3335, with the following pan-allofamic formula (PAF):

² See, e.g. Wolfenden 1929:114-115; Benedict 1972 (STC), pp. 80-84; Matisoff 1978, pp. 41-2.

³ Benedict once suggested to me (p.c., 1977) that this Chinese morpheme was related to PTB ***s-tu** 'vulva' (no doubt with the "collective suffix" ***-n**) [STC, notes 284, 428], though this seems entirely fanciful.

⁴ The notation for reconstructed OC forms used here is slightly different from that of Baxter 1992, reflecting some modifications he made during his visit to the STEDT project (April-May, 1995). The rhyme reconstructed here as ***-ɔ̃n** was ***-ɪn** in Baxter 1992.

⁵ GSR remarks that there are no text examples of this character, but Shuowen defines it as 'buttocks', thus taking it to be the primary form of 429b-c, the character that supplanted it at an early date. The graph seems to have been a drawing of a man sitting on a stool.

⁶ The meaning 'palace; hall' is post-Han.

*	s-	u	
	t		n
	m-	i	

1.2 HEEL

This is by no means the end of the story, however. A compound in Wancho (Northern Naga) leads to a rather unexpected semantic association with another bodypart:

Wancho **chi-dun** 'heel' (**chi** 'foot').

A moment's reflection shows this to be a totally natural association, based on similarity of shape and relative position.⁷ A heel is to the foot what the buttocks are to the trunk of the body:

HEEL : FOOT :: BUTTOCKS : BODY.⁸

Formations similar to the Wancho compound occur with the meaning 'heel' in several branches of TB, where our etymon #3335 appears almost always with **-u-** vocalism; but the key language Jingpho provides evidence also for the variant in **-i-**.

1.21 Forms for 'heel' with **-u-** vocalism

Naga:

Wancho **chi-dun**

Khözha **šú-dò**

Tujia (unclassified):

Tujia **tçi²¹ tʰũ²¹**

Loloish:

Phunoi⁹ **pi³³tun¹¹**

⁷ See the taxonomy of bodypart metonymies in Matisoff 1978 (VSTB), pp. 179-193.

⁸ Although the English word *heel* is primarily used of our lower extremities, it is also applicable by extension to the fleshy rounded base of the palm, the *heel of the hand*. Cf. the discussion of Lahu **làʔ-mě-cu/cwi** ~ **làʔ-ŋě-cu/cwi** 'elbow' ('hand-tail', below, note 19).

⁹ For the first syllable see BEHIND/HEEL (4.0 below).

West Himalayish:

Pattani ¹⁰	<i>thu-ri</i>
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*Tani:*¹¹

Apatani	<i>lu-du</i>
Miri	<i>lu-du</i>
Bengni ¹²	<i>lu-duk</i>
Padam-Mising	<i>le-du</i>
Bokar	<i>li-tu ~ li-du</i>
Idu	<i>bru-du</i>

1.22 The Jingpho forms with *-i-* vocalism

The Jingpho words **ṣətīn** 'buttock' (above) and **ləthīn** 'heel' stand in an obvious allofamic relationship. Furthermore, for once we can plausibly derive each of these two prefixes from a full morphemic prototype: the **ṣə-** of **ṣətīn** certainly looks like a reduction of PTB ***sya** 'flesh; meat; animal' (i.e. "the fleshy **tīn**"); while the **lə-** of **ləthīn** is clearly a reduced form of PTB ***lak** 'hand', which is frequently prefixed to Jingpho nouns referring to the limbs, or verbs referring to action with the hands or feet (i.e. "the **tīn** of the limb").¹³

Several Himalayish languages have words for 'heel' with first syllables that bear a resemblance to this Jingpho form (Kulung and Thulung **din-di-ri**, Khaling **'dhin-di-ri**) but these are immediately suspect as loans from Nepali because of their virtually identical polysyllabic shapes.¹⁴

¹⁰ This is the only form I have found where the reflex of our etymon is not the last syllable of its compound. It is perhaps a loan from Indo-Aryan (see below 1.22).

¹¹ See J. T.-S. Sun 1993.

¹² Most of these Tani forms seem to reflect Proto-Tani ***du**, though the root is not explicitly reconstructed in Sun 1993. Only the Bengni form suggests an original final consonant, which may have been ***dental** rather than ***velar**, since PTani ***-un** regularly became Bengni **-uŋ** (Sun 1993, Section 2.4.2). If the velarity of this Bengni form is probative (i.e. is taken to reflect a genuine Proto-Tani variant with final velar), it should perhaps be assigned to ***r-tuŋ** (2.0 below). The first element in these compounds is nearly identical to the words for *foot* in the various languages, reconstructed by Sun as Proto-Tani ***lə** or ***le**.

¹³ See Matisoff 1969:187; and STC:106-107, and note 308 (p. 110). Note the Jingpho generalization of HAND to LIMB in general. The Jg. word for 'foot; leg' itself (**ləgō**) has this prefix. (A fuller expression for 'heel' is **ləgō ləthīn**, literally "foot-heel"). Among many other examples that could be cited are **ləphà** 'palm', **ləthék** 'pluck; flick with a finger', **ləphūt** 'knee', **ləkhāt** 'kick', etc.

¹⁴ Boyd Michailovsky (p.c. July 1995) feels that the Khaling voiced aspirate is not necessarily a proof of Indo-Aryan origin, since such articulations freely creep into native TB lexical items in