SQUIBS AND ETYMOLOGIES

Vietnamese /s/ and /x/: the chữ nôm evidence

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As first established by Maspero (1912), Vn. initial s- (Hanoi /s/), Saigon /z/ is the reflex for PMK clusters of stop + r/l type, e.g. Vn. sông 'river'; Bahnar kòŋ, Cham (loan) kraŋ, Mon kرأŋ, P-Waic *kləŋ*-kɾəŋ. Most of the closely related Muong languages have cluster reflexes of various kinds but Khen, on which Thompson (1976) based his PVM reconstructions, has simply x- here. Thompson reconstructed *kh- for an intermediate Vn./Khen level but this will hardly do since five of the forms involved (see Maspero, cit. supra and Huffman 1977 for the MK cognates) are written in the native chữ nôm ('southern script') with initial l- (in MC) phonetic elements; sau 'behind, after' ᵃ lư; sau 'six' ᵃ lâu (cf. 1055a); sau 'deep' ᵃ lư (cf. 123a); sông 'river' ᴾ lư (cf. 1193a); sòng 'live' ᵃ lư (cf. 1180a) (chữ nôm from Génibrel); cf. also sao (=sãawA) 'star' ᵃ lâu, an apparent early loan from Kadai (AT): Saek traaw1 < P-Tai *draawA (see Benedict 1975: Glossary under SUN/STAR/SKY). Another pair of Vn. forms in this group (Khen x-) but without known MK correspondences are written similarly: sàng 'coffin' ᵃ lư (cf. 898a); sang 'go across' ᵃ lăn (735r). All in all, some 50 Vn. forms with initial s- are written in this fashion in the chữ nôm, attested for the 8th century A.D. but generally of much later date, employing both newly created characters (e.g. ᵃ ) and standard (often rare) characters used as phonetic elements (e.g. ᵃ ); see the excellent review by Nguyễn (1979).

One can hardly set up an earlier *kr- or *kl- in view of the chữ nôm l- (rather than *ki- or the like) but *xl- or *hl- seems likely, yielding Khen x-, with support from a pair of early loans from Chinese, where initials of this type are not unknown (P-Min has *sl- > *hl-): sáp 'wax' ᵃ lệp (cf 637a); sen 'lotus' ᵃ lăn (213d) (but contra Downer [1973] suóc, Khen xák 'strength, force' probably belongs not with ᵃ ląd, id. (928a) but rather with ᵃ t'ák (921g), as written, since both have the additional glosses 'prepare, put in order' and 'to order'; cf. also sang 'bark of a tree which the poor chew with betel', written ᵃ lạn (735r), and Laha hlaŋ 'betel', from a complex AT etymology (see Benedict 1975: Glossary under ARECA).

Other Vn. forms in the same group (Khen x-) are written with chữ nôm, presumably of later origin, that reflect the shift to s-. These include sâm ᵃ 'thunder' (cf. 620c), with MK comparisons (Maspero); cf. also sa 'fall' and sóc 'squirrel' (Maspero), sau 'to bark' (Huffman), all with MK cognates. The single outside comparison in this group also points to an earlier *hl-: sat ᵃ 'iron' ( ⁴ 402a), Khen xạc; P-Tai *hlek (PVM, like Burmese, has -ac < *-Ik ~ *-ek). It should be noted, however, that Khen also has x- for Vietnamese s- in Sino-Vietnamese loans such as sô' (123r), Khen xo 'number' (cf. Boro kh- < *s-).
Rather surprisingly, the chũ nôm also point to an earlier */l/ or */r/ in four Vn. forms with initial x- (Hanoi and Saigon s-). PMK initial *s- regularly yielded Vn. t-, as pointed out by Maspero: tóc 'hair'; cf. Mon, Stieng sôk; Khmer sôk; P-Semitic *sɔ̄k, with Vn. x- corresponding rather to a palatal stop elsewhere in MK: Vn. xuố̂ng 'bone', Khen sîən ~ sjîən (PVM *c'îən); Khmer cîən; Khmu cîaŋ, P-Semitic *jîaŋ. It is highly significant that one of the four forms involved appears to be the Vn. cognate of PAA *(ca)cak (partial reduplication) 'tear/torn': Kherwari (Munda group) *cacak: Mon cak (Benedict 1975: 476), viz. xâc 'torn' (without l- in wr.), pointing to an earlier (pre-Vn. level) infixed form such as *c/r/ak, with x- for *c- in the (secondary) consonant cluster (cf. 'bone', above). It also seems significant that a second form in this group is connected with a puzzling set discussed by Thompson (p. 1146): xông 'to lower' (cf. 1180); cf. xông 'to descend', (no l- in wr.); Khen has both xuan 'lower' and t'uoŋ 'descend', the latter suggestive of an earlier cluster with */t/ or */c/; these forms are possibly related to P-Tai *loŋ¹ (N. Tai *roŋ¹) 'descend'; *loŋ² 'descend (float down) a stream'. No comparisons have been uncovered for the remaining two forms in this group: xôp 'soft, tender' (637d); xôp 'fall upon (attack)' (637d).

1 Abbreviations: AA Austroasiatic; AT Austro-Thai; MC Middle Chinese; MK Mon-Khmer; P Proto-; Vn. Vietnamese; VM Viet-Muong.

REFERENCES


