

Genital flipflop: a Chinese note

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In an earlier note on Karen genital flipflop (Benedict 1979), I reached the conclusion that "the basic Tibeto-Burman/Tibeto-Karen (perhaps also ST) term for 'vulva' is represented by *tɛy^B", maintained in this sense in Miri and perhaps also Mikir (added by Matisoff in fn. 34), but flipflopped to 'penis' in Karen. I also expressed the hope that other representatives of this root would in time come to light. I had been thinking in terms of TB but a likely Han cognate has now appeared, indicating a PST provenience for this root.

The Chinese form is to be reconstructed as *tiet/tiet ~ tiět/tiět 月空 'vulva' but there's a small problem connected with it: the character apparently does not appear with this gloss in any Chinese lexicon nor have any dialectical representatives of it been recorded to date.¹ The character does appear in Yupian, of uncertain date but no later than the Liang dynasty (A.D. 502-556), and was later copied in the Kangxi and other dictionaries, but it was provided with an enigmatic gloss: 肉生也 'flesh grows'. The Sino-Japanese (S-J) on reading is /chitsu/, matching the reading for tiet/tiet ~ tiět/tiět 突 'stop up', which can be seen as the phonetic element in 月空. The S-J gloss is 'vulva', and the word is employed very much as one might expect, in medical terms and the like. It would seem that somehow the character found its way into Yupian, probably very much to the horror of the Liang official monitoring that dictionary.

¹ This conclusion is based on lexicographical research, in Japanese as well as Chinese sources, carried out by Michael Carr and Paul Yang, to whom I am greatly indebted.

project, and *faute de mieux* was provided with a nonsensical (albeit possibly suggestive) gloss. Alternatively, one can regard the 'vulva' gloss as a loan that became attached to the character and was later adopted by Sino-Japanese.²

One might argue here that an Old Chinese/Middle Chinese reconstitution based entirely on a loan to S-J is a risky proposition. In this case, by great good fortune, two other loans from the same Han source are available: P-Yao *tiet⁷ 'vagina' (Haudricourt), paralleling *siet⁷ '7th' and ts'iet⁷ 'seven' (GSR-400a); White Sand Li tet⁷ 'vagina' perhaps via Yao (both spoken on Hainan Island). One might also wonder about the very fact of these loans, but it turns out that 'vulva/vagina' has proved to be an eminently borrowable item in East/SE Asia; the P-Tai *hi i^A was long ago borrowed by the obscure DTKN dialect of Chinese and later found its way into Cantonese (hay^A) (see Benedict 1989) while recent loans from the Proto-Lolo-Burmese *b(y)et ~ *bat doublet appear in the Kam-Sui languages (see my forthcoming LTBA paper on the Proto-Lolo-Burmese nominalizing *-t suffix).³ It might be pointed out that this is hardly a case of East vs. West, inasmuch as our English *vulva* and *vagina* are not exactly Anglo-Saxon items.

We are left with the problem of relating the PTB/PTK *tey^B and the reconstituted OC/MC *tiet/tiet - *tiet̚t̚ - *tiet̚t̚. The final *-t may well represent an earlier (PST-level) suffixed *-s or *-t, paralleling the ST root for 'head' (Benedict 1987, #11); cf. WT dbu 'head' - dbu-ma 'the middle [way etc.]' - dbu s 'middle, center'; OC/MC d'u/d'əu 頭 'head' (GSR

² Benedict himself has flipflopped on the etymology of Japanese *chitsū*. In an early version of Benedict 1990, he treated it as a native Japanese lexical item, attempting to relate it to Fijian *ilu* 'penis', from a presumed Proto-Austro-Japanese prototype. [Ed.]

³ See also Bauer 1991 (this issue). [Ed.]

118e), from *d-(b)u through prefix preemption (see Benedict 1987:33 ff.); also *b'wæt/b'uæt 肚 (not in GSR) *(d-)bus (reg. *-s > -t shift) '(body center:) navel'. Alternatively, the *-t can be viewed as the reflex after a front vowel of prefixed *s- (see Benedict 1980; also 1987), here the 'bodypart *s- prefix', with the parallel this time supplied by PST *(s-)nəy^λ 'sun/day'; cf. Chepang hni- < *s-ni- '(comp.) afternoon'; Jingpo śənī 'day'; WB ne < *nəy^λ 'sun' ~ ne? < *s-nəy^λ 'day'; OC/MC *(s-)ńĭět/ńźĭět < *s-nəy^λ 日 'sun/day' (GSR 404a), with *(s-) indicated by the Proto-Min evidence (see analysis under Benedict 1987, #119). Either interpretation permits the recognition of PST *tey^B ~ *s-tey^B as the basic term for this body part at that early level, with replacement by the euphemistic 'something hidden/shameful' already underway (see my forthcoming LTBA paper on the nominalizing Proto-Lolo-Burmese *-t suffix).

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