

# Another Note on Genital Flipflop

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Paul K. Benedict has written two notes in LTBA discussing semantic flipflops between meanings of 'penis' and 'vulva' for words in several Asian languages.<sup>1</sup> He proposed that the Sino-Tibetan root \*li(-n) 'penis' flipflopped to the Proto-Karen \*lin 'vulva', and the Austro-Tai root \*puki < \*(m)pu(N)qi 'vulva' flipflopped to the Tsou (Formosan) boki 'penis'.<sup>2</sup> This note concerns an old Chinese word for 'genitalia'.

Early Chinese appeared to lack any examples of genital flipflops, and Benedict (1979: 29) noted that: "This is hardly surprising, since that language seems long ago to have entered into a diabolical conspiracy to conceal basic terms in the 'genital' category." This conspiracy is true, it was not until the Ming dynasty that dictionaries included genital vocabulary (e.g., bī 屌 'vagina'; liáo 屌, qíu 屌, and diǎo 屌 all meaning 'penis').<sup>3</sup> But it can be noted that the word yīn 陰 (the yin of yin/yang) had early usages in meanings of both 'penis' and

1. Paul K. Benedict, 1979, "A Note on Karen Genital Flipflop," LTBA 5.1:21-24; 1981, "A Further (Unexpurgated) Note on Karen Genital Flipflop," LTBA 6.1:103.

2. This same AT root \*puki maintained the meaning of 'vulva' in another Formosan language, Ami puki 'vulva'.

3. These words are first recorded in the Ming dictionaries Zheng-zitong 正字通 and Zihui 字彙. It is of interest that all of these have the corpse/body radical, and may have been coined in order to give a written form to words that were current only in colloquial usage.

'vagina'. Could the flap over genital flipflops be related with semantic specialization (from 'genitalia' to either 'penis' or 'vagina') rather than semantic reversal (from 'penis' to 'vagina' or vice versa)?

The word yīn 陰 (GSR 65ly \*<sup>4</sup>iəm/<sup>5</sup>iəm/yin) originally meant 'shady/dark (side)', i.e. north side of a hill or south side of a river. From this original 'shady/dark' meaning, yīn 陰 was applied to many other meanings: (most importantly) the 'negative/feminine cosmogonic principle'; 'cloudy, overcast', 'concealed, hidden, unseen'; 'clandestine, secret'; 'cunning, crafty'; 'sinister'; 'hell'; 'supernatural'; as well as 'genitals' of both sexes. There is a semantic association between the genital 'penis' and 'vulva' meanings of yin and other meanings such as 'dark', 'hidden', and 'secret'.

The earliest occurrences of yīn 陰 in the 'genital' sense are in Han dynastic histories over two thousand years old. The (91 B.C.) Shiji 史記 biography of Lu Buwei 呂不韋 mentions a

4. There is, of course, a close semantic fit between 'penis' and 'vagina'. Benedict's original reference (KGFF) pointed out that the two are often found "in association."

5. Benedict, in personal communication, suggested that this AC \*<sup>4</sup>iəm is probably related to a PST \*<sup>5</sup>um 'cover' (cf. the WB \*<sup>5</sup>um 'cover over' and um < \*<sup>5</sup>s-um 'overcast'); and the phonetic \*<sup>4</sup>k'iəm possibly from a \*<sup>5</sup>s-k'iən.

6. Cf. where the sun never shines.

7. One possibly earlier usage is in the (ca. third century B.C.) Zhouli 周礼 which has yīnlǐ 陰礼 'female? rites' used in sexual contexts. There is also a hapax legomenon for '(baby's) penis' found in the Daodejing 道德經 (ch. 55, note that most translators, except Erkes, avoid the actual meaning) of zūi (GSR 468g'-h' \*<sup>5</sup>twər/tsuəi/tsuei) written either 𦍋 with the blood radical or 𦍋 with the flesh radical.

search for a roué with a 'big penis' (大陰). The (78 A.D.) Hanshu 漢書 biography of the second Han emperor Hui Di 惠帝 recounts a draconian punishment for attempted suicide: a woman had a 'post stuck up her vagina' (板代其陰中),<sup>9</sup> and then had her nose, lips, and tongue cut off.

Modern Chinese (and Japanese) vocabulary includes many descendants of the 'genital' yīn. Most of these yin-words in the genital semantic field are polite or technical in usage. More of them refer to the female genitals ('vulva' is 陰門 or 陰戶, both literally "yin-door," 'clitoris' is 陰核 "yin-kernel,"<sup>10</sup> 'labia' is 陰脣 "yin-lips," and 'vagina' is 陰道 "yin-way,") than to male genitals ('penis' is 陰莖 "yin-stem," and 'scrotum' is 陰囊 "yin-bag"). There are two possible causes for the relative lack of male genital vocabulary with yin-words. Either the 'feminine' association of yīn, as opposed to the 'masculine' yāng, or the lexicalization of other synonyms for 'penis' (e.g., rénshì 人勢 "man's force" or nángēn 男根 "man's root").

The recorded history of the Chinese yīn 陰 shows that it has been changing from general reference to either male or female genitalia ('penis', 'vulva', 'vagina') to special reference to the female genitals. In contrast, the genital flipflop for the

8. This is probably the earliest extant reference to the well-endowed Lao Ai 嫪毐 who was not the "eunuch" he pretended to be. Giles' dictionary defines this 大陰 as "a large membrum virile," and this is the same type of "scholarly" obfuscation that has hidden the genital vocabulary in many languages.

9. In reference to males, this zhūo 杵 (GSR 1218c \*tūk/āk/cho) 'beat, strike' usually means 'castrate; eunuch'.

10. Besides 'vagina', this yīndào 陰道 can also mean 'shady road', 'path of the moon', and 'passive behavior'.

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Karen lin from 'penis' to 'vulva' is well attested, and does not seem to be a case of semantic narrowing from a protoform meaning 'genitalia'. Two different semantic changes are involved. First, specialization or narrowing of sense reference; e.g., the English whore derives from the Latin carus 'dear, beloved'.<sup>12</sup> Second, flipflop or reversal of meaning;<sup>13</sup> e.g., the (esp. Black) English bad has developed a slang meaning of 'good'. The Chinese yin indicates semantic specialization; the Karen lin indicates semantic flipflop. Are these linguistically unique, or have genital words in other languages undergone similar changes?

Genital vocabulary is frequently obscured for reasons of taboo and euphemism--e.g., the Chinese sī 私 'private, personal' and the English privates or private parts.<sup>14</sup> Chinese linguistics has a special problem of the "diabolical coverup" caused by centuries of Confucian prudery.<sup>15</sup> Further studies of the semantics of genital words may expose some of the coverups.

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11. Benedict gives cognates from languages including Garo, Dimas, Burmese, Kanauri, and Bahing.

12. Cf. charity which also comes from the same root.

13. This is called "antonymic change" by James Matisoff, Variational Semantics in Tibeto-Burman 1978:82-86.

14. Leonard Bloomfield, Language, 1933:396, noted that because of taboos of homophony, cock and ass are being replaced by rooster and donkey in American English.

15. This aversion to use sexual vocabulary has also affected the translation of Buddhist sutras. Nakamura Hajime, Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples, 1964:256 quotes a Pali "those who drink liquor are apt to display their sexual organs" translated into Chinese as "those who drink liquor are apt to become angry."