mặt cá: FROM "FISHES' EYES" TO "ANKLEBONES":  
A VIETNAMESE CALQUE?

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'mặt cá là cái gì' (nôm=相鬍胛骨): "what are fishes' eyes?", asks Vietnamese (VN). The earliest record so far discovered in answer is Alexandre de Rhodes' Dictionarium entry (1651:456): 'mặt cá: artelho do pé: talus, i.', in which the Latin talus means 'ankle, anklebone'. Legrand de la Liraye (1874:150b) translates it as 'cheville du pied', Taberd (1877:271a) as 'Occulus pisçis; malleoli', while Ravier (1880:706a) notes 'malleolus #1, mặt cá (ní chân tay)' (=place of the feet/legs and hands/arms). Cùa (1897:86b) describes it as 'flesched bone swelling on both sides of the foot at the point where it joins the leg'; Tự Đức (1898:q.3, 3a4, p.51 = p.216, 1.19) uses it cryptically to translate the Chinese character 腳 huái 'ankle' (="anklebone"), huái in Modern Standard Chinese (=putong huái/MSC). Again, Bonet (1899:407a) records it as 'cheville du pied; litt. œil de poisson', Huệ (1937:55a, 2) repeating it as 'cheville du pied, cor, chevillon', while Trữ (1960:299b) defines it as 'heads of bones jutting out at the neck of legs (=ankle) (qv. Trữ 1970:II, 894a) and the Hồi Khai Trí (1968:337b) tells us that it is 'the head of a bone budding out near the neck of the leg' (=i.e. the ankle), hence 'the anklebone'.

This seems to be highly figurative language, a descriptive pun (qv. Emeneau 1947; Hoạ 1955; Davidson 1978:37ff., 1986a:354, n.37), for to find a fish's eye, probably rather dead in appearance, looking up at you from the anklebone of a person's leg, bulging out dull, then whitish as it stretches from where it peaks to the darker skin surrounding it on legs that have travelled in fields of paddy, sea-salt, or whatever else, in a Vietnamese-style climate, will certainly provide yet another superb and humorous expression of the impression intended, since the Vietnamese have long associated their vital environment with all the other natural symbolism that they envisage (e.g. Davidson 1978).

Such visual association (qv. n.3), is frequently complemented by word-play afforded by the opportunities of homophony. An encounter is the Modern Mon (NM) mót coig/ 'anklebone' (lit. 'eye of the elephant'; Shorto 1962:170b mót coig; ref. p.96b coing = 'elephant'), while in inscriptive language one finds cin2/cin = 'elephant' (Shorto 1971:98) and jùn/jun/ 'lower limb' (ibid.,125), where a mót2/mot/ n.'eye' (ibid.,285) plus jùn would have provided us with the expected
Mon-Khmer (MK) and Malayo-Polynesian (MP) 'eye of the leg' for an 'anklebone'!° This 'confusion' may well have stemmed from, or led to, folk-etymology and folk taxonomy -- an investigation lying in wait -- but it further emphasizes the point already made of the desire for the use of figurative language and especially for descriptive punning.

Parts of the body are, however, often not identified with any precision in basic and vernacular Vietnamese language, that is, language which excludes or may not include the use of the specific, pointed Hán-Việt (HV) vocabulary found in the literary language of the educated élite, and which is also pre-modern, that is, prior to the introduction of western, scientific and other specialist vocabulary. A general area of the body may be referred to, but not a specific part of it, by a single, special word. So, chân (var. chơn, chinh) stands broadly for both 'leg' and 'foot', tay for 'arm' and 'hand', while together chân tay means 'limbs'. When an anatomical feature does captivate attention and is accorded a specific term, structural or functional perception of it is a common reason for the formation of the word or words describing it. So, many South-East Asian languages have captured in their vocabularies imagination the concept of the ankle or wrist as the 'neck' of the leg or arm and the anklebone as the 'eye' of the leg/foot even though in actuality it is not a part of the ankle itself but a swelling out on both sides of the lower end of the two leg bones (tibia and fibula) at the point at which they articulate with the tarsal bones (qv. Căa 1987:86b).

Naturally, words for 'hands' and 'arms', 'feet' and 'legs' may well have changed in the language families that inhabit South-East Asia, China, South Asia, Oceania and other related areas as their languages developed from the early through to the modern forms, but the phonetic similarity is even now often noticeable. The same is also evident for the words for the 'eye' (e.g. Shorto 1971:285, i.a.) since one finds links between the Sino-Tibetan, Sino-Tai, Austroasiatic and Austro-Nesian forms in both their phonetics and the semantic functions performed. So, as in Vietnamese we have an 'arm' tay, its 'neck' cò becomes immediately recognizable as the 'wrist' cò tay, as does the leg's 'neck' become an 'ankle' cò chân (e.g. Gouin 1957:181b). Other examples are numerous (qv. n.8 below) but, especially when we find the 'board, table' (bàn cát, cf. van 'plank') helping to structure a 'hand' bàn tay or 'foot' bàn chân, why do we not 'eye' the 'leg' (mắt chân) to make an 'anklebone'? After all, we have already met the partially successful Modern Mon attempt of Môt coing and the Malay mata kaki. Bahnar provides us with mặt jong 'cheville du pied' (Dourisbourne 1899:203; cf. Katu manist, maniet, identified as mặt cát in the Vietnamese equivalents but translated as 'ankle' in the English (Costello 1971:27, 30) and probably from mà 'eye', cf. katam (loc.ott.), while Sedang gives us mà cheáng 'ankle' (lit. 'eye
of the leg/foot') and ma kông 'wrist' (Smith 1962:15-16) and we can note en passant the Chrau jāng 'leg, foot' (Thomas 1966:24), unfortunately with no further relevant data. Going south in present-day Vietnamese territory, we discover more support from the Cham móta takai (cf. takan takay, Moussay 1971:379b 'cheville du pied'; cf. ibid., 224 móta le 'cheville') with the other common uses of the 'eye/face' word as 'node, joint', etc. The same occurs in Nicobarese (Roepsforff 1884:78, 122, 149, mathōu, --okloaka-la; --olmat, etc.; cf. Man 1898-9:6, 178a).

This Vietnamese 'neck' cò of the 'arm' or 'leg', joining them to 'hands' or 'feet', finds many other Mon-Khmer language equivalents, two directly apparent examples being Modern Khmer kœ: day 'wrist', kœ: cviç 'ankle' (Jacob 1971:1) and Modern Mon kœ:ćăng 'ankle', kœ: toa 'wrist' (Shorto 1962:53a). Of immediate interest, therefore, and suggestively cognate is the Lao khâ: thâo 'ankle' (lit. joint of the foot) (Kerr 1972:129b; cf. ibid., 116b khâ:) which is supported by the Modern Standard Thai (MST) khot thaaw 'ankle'; lit. joint of the foot' (not 'leg', khâa, (n.b. Li 1977:213, §10.6.29 among other entries, e.g. §2.23, 14.11.4, etc.) -- with a secondary vernacular tea thum (thaaw) 'eye of the node (of the foot)' >'anklebone'. Thus, the possibility of 'link' cognates -- joint-neck-tibia-shin -- keeps springing to mind. Indeed, there is an impression of 'joining, uniting, linking' and of 'reaching, attaining, going to' (see GSR 675a-d合; e. 海 *g̰aŋ影响力的 [MSC hē] encouraged by the nôm character for 'neck' which one also finds as Hân-Viêt, and in the MSC compound kîllou 'skeleton', (= khô lâu; cf. MSC gûc 'ibid.' = HV cot cach). Additionally, there is the Vietnamese word for 'joint; physical articulation' khô câ (>'bone-joint' = xìu hùng), which strongly suggests a relation between it and the Vietnamese hop 合 'unite, etc.', joining things together.

Reverting in this context to a possibly pre-sinitic word (or a very early Chinese loan?) preserved in present-day Chinese territory, one finds in MSC jiâo (GSR 1166p *k'og/ k'au/k'iao 'tibia'; =?HV qiao), its variant character used for 'joint' and presented in Ningpo dialect as gâo (Morrison 1876:20b), ngày in Swatow (Gibson 1886:107c; cf. VN ngày hợp 'join again' =?Tie-chiu/Hokkien) and its parallel MSC jīng e.g. jīngxī 'shinbone' ('tibia' (cf. GSR 83k. *k'ieng/kgeng/ k'ing 'leg, shank (Lun yü)') as well as the two pronunciations for 'neck' in MSC gêng/jīng (GSR 83n. *k'ieng kgong/kgong/, and *k'ieng/giêng/k'ing... (Tso)), all of which are related, at least phonetically. Hence the pronunciations for the word for 'neck' in Vietnamese cò, the Thai khô:, Lào khâ:, a large number of Mon-Khmer languages (qv. Shorto 1971:52), and Archaic Chinese *k'og (GSR 1166p), thus cognate before us. The image of an articulated (=joint), tube-like connection of varying lengths between the torso and its ending appendages does, of course, bring the possible linked, root-origins of such words together, while the closeness in pronunciation of the 'leg' word
in a range of South Eastern Chinese dialects (qv. Bauer 1987), e.g. khá, keuk (=HV kúóc, also read kúóc, giving rise to goe 'base, foot (of a tree) support') (Trần 1960:46a) reconstructed as Archaic Chinese *kia-kia (GSR 776g-h), forcefully implies a pre-sinitic origin of the word that ends up as the Chinese character 脚/腳 (MSC juē, jiǎo).

But here the Vietnamese mạt ca 'anklebone' remains distinctly in the forefront of one's mind. If the base word chân 'leg, foot' which qualified other associated ideas giving us words like 'ankle', 'foot', 'toe', 'toenail', 'heel', etc., (qv. n.8 below) fulfils its purpose, then why does an 'anklebone' suddenly turn from the "eye" of the leg into a 'fish's eye'? Naturally, in a Vietnamese language situation such as this, one looks to the Chinese reservoir of vocabulary for help in solving the problem. In Archaic and in Ancient Chinese one does not find the 'anklebone' separately listed, one finds the 'ankle' (GSR 351j. *g'lar/wa:/hua ankle (Li) = MSC húa, huái), the Han-Việt reading for which is hoạ (Thiệu Chánh 1966: 660a1) but which is intriguingly identified as an 'anklebone' (ibid.), and clearly recorded as such in the Tự Định (1898:q.3, 3a1=5.51=226, 1.29 as: 'khóa mạt ca') while the MSC gives us hủi for 'ankle' and huáizhú for 'anklebone' (cf. i.a. Maclay 1929: 1090 kua-gáuk Other HV 'pedal' terms flourish too. Meanwhile, the MSC 'ankle' occurs as jíáoyóu (var. jíxíhuái, júcián) while the Núngpo kyiāh tsang 'ankle' (cf. kyiāh gao 'ankle-joint', Morrison 1876.20b) relates directly to a Hakka kiok tsang 'heel', and the Hakka 'ankle' kiok muk (cf. kiok nán, MacIver 1926: 288b) connects well with the Shanghai kyak mok. Yet, focusing on the 'eye' as the centre of attention in this 'joint', this 'link', strikingly important is the awareness of the "eye" of the "leg", 'foot', in Southern, and in particular in South Eastern Chinese dialects. There is Cantonese keuk ngaán (kvut) 'ankle(bone)' (qv. MSC, above; cf. MacIver 1926:344b, Hakka kwa-kwét 'the anklebone'), Lungtu xháa muk, Púzhōu ká ngu mèk ("the leg [joint]'s ox's eye") (Maclay 1929:1021), the Swatow kha-mák 'anklebone' (and variants, Lechler 1883:9) and the Amoy 'ankle' k'á bāk (liter. kick bok, kha-bak, kis? bāk; cf. C. Douglas 1899: 10a, 257b, kha-bāk, 'ankle', R. kiok.col. kioh). The thought came to my mind of a word of pre-sinitic origin preserved in what are termed South Eastern Chinese dialects and then spurred into a calque by the creative imagination of the Vietnamese because it rhymed descriptively with the phonetic and thence the visual awareness of a 'fish's "eye"' (mạt ca <*khá mák). And, almost instinctively one senses that the Hokkien [Hkn.=Púzhōu] dialects offer the greatest suggestions. Among them, I think that Tie-chiu (=Chaozhōu) enlivens us. In it we find mák 目 'eye (Goddard 1883:103a) and k'á "foot" (ibid., 63a), the tone, pitch and contour of whose pronunciation conform well with the Vietnamese mạt ca, strengthening the argument since it was the speakers of Tie-chiu who made up the largest Chinese
population contributing to the 'early' Vietnamese vocabulary, just as it appears to be Swatow speakers who influenced Thai (Egerod 1959).

For here, it seems, we do have a Chinese-Vietnamese calque created by the Vietnamese who, hearing this South Eastern 'Chinese' word *k’a* (<TC= Hkn.) for 'foot', visualized its sound association with their word cá, 'fish' and, preferring the fun behind a 'fish's "eye"', mat ca, to the neutrality of such words as might otherwise have been their special terms (e.g. *gò chăn 'hillock of the leg/foot', *mat chăn 'eye of the leg/foot'), transposed the Tie-chiu k’a mák ('foot's eye' >'anklebone') into their own language, reordering the word as mák k’a to fit their syntax, to create a calque, so that the 'anklebones' became 'fishes' eyes', mat că

1. Immediately, we are alerted to an unusual etymology. Normally, mat 'eyes' are classified as animate by con so that con mat că would mean 'the eye of fishes' even though the syntactic rhythm feels heavily clumsy. But here, it is classified as inanimate by cái, suggesting a variant meaning. What is the reason? (qv. Thiếu Châu 1966:660a [Hán-Việt (HV= Sino-Vietnamese) hōa, (or khōa).

2. Listings of dictionary entries could continue, but they are not being included as they are meaningfully repetitive, if not identical; e.g. Hung 1955:414a; Thanh Nghị 1967:885a: 'balls of bone jutting out on both sides of the ankle'; Hoa 1967:270a, etc.

3. So, too, is the Palaung ra-ngyë jwing 'ankle' (lit. 'joint of the leg') (Milne 1931:18), with 'anklebone' (loc.cit.) a ka-äng i-sār, that is, 'bone of the fowl, hen' (?cockspur [bone]); cf. VN cerca 'cockspur'; xūng - 'astragalus').

4. Note, interestingly, that in Chinese we have the word 'eye', MSC yēn, reconstructed as GSR 4167. *ngen/ngen:/yen eye (Yi) which is also a 'loan for *ngen/ngen:/en, protrude as a knob (Choulil) (loc.cit.). The HV is năn/nān (qv. de Rhodes 1651:548, cf. 456; Tr. 1898: q.3, 5a-4, p.52 =p.218, 1.5 năn mat; Davidson 1975:597, no.487). In passing, 'faces' and 'eyes' do, understandably, go together (e.g. Shorto 1971:285; Tr. 1898: q.3, la5, p.50 năn mat =p.215, 1.9 'dien mat').
5. For instance, there is trúng cat 'eggs of fishes' (qv. Bonet 1899:34la trúng ca 'œuf de poisson'), whence comes 'spawn' and then, because of the visual similarity, 'blackhead, comedo' (Hòa 1967:516a; Huê 1937:1088b; cf. Guinin 1957:141b). This is possibly a play on words, on chung 'symptom of an illness' (nôm/HV 湊; MSC zhèng) plus ca 'fishes', whence 'small white face pimples'. Another example is hồn dải (lit. 'balls/stones of the genitals') 'testicles' (Hòa 1967:84a; Huê 1937:191b) paralleled by trúng dải (lit. 'eggs of the genitals') 'sperm' (Bonet 1899:34la; cf. Guinin 1957:148b, i.a.). Note dải 'to urinate' (also sometimes written in nôm). Similarly, one finds go mâm literally 'mound/knoll of the cheek', so 'cheekbone' (Bonet 1899:230b 'joue, pommette'; Huê 1937:314a; Guinin 1957:482b), but why mât ca for 'anklebone'?

6. The play on words could also have given us môt coin¹ 'eye of the elephant' and môt coin² 'eye of the ridgepole of the house' (Shorto 1962:96b). Compare the Archaic Chinese use of (MSC liào 'tibia') for 'the tapering end of the spoke of a wheel (Chouli)', (GSR 1166p.).

7. Nowadays, the scientific and medical vocabulary of Vietnamese is as detailed in its anatomical and other descriptions and recognitions (e.g. Thanh Ngó 1967:1532a; Hòa 1967:565a-b) as its main new source language, French; in fact, it is probably made richer by ready recourse to Chinese wherever that proved necessary. Thus Vietnamese has a very rich vocabulary and usually treats technical-type terms in three ways:

(i) identifying them by direct translation into VN - e.g. 'astragalus' = xương cựa 'cockspur bone';

(ii) by use of Chinese terms in the HV pronunciation of their characters, although a degree of Vietnamese word-ordering may be introduced -- e.g. 'haemophilia' = bệnh huyết_ART <MSC xuéyou bing血友病; or,

(iii) by transliteration from the French -- e.g.'xanthin'= xâng-tin.

8. qqv. Shorto 1971:125; Davidson 1975:597, esp. nos. 474, 489-92. So, paralleling one another, are such compounds as:

bàn ('table/board') chân 'foot' = bàn tay 'hand'
ngón ('toe/finger') chân 'toe' = ngón tay 'finger'
mông ('nail/claw') chân 'toenail' = mông tay 'fingernail'
cô ('neck') chân 'ankle' = cô tay 'wrist'
(Hòa 1967:58a, 407b; also Bonet 1899:407a; i.a.; cf. cỏng 'paw, leg (of animal)'). Nonetheless, there are independent words for special parts of the body, e.g. gòi 'knee', versus
khủyu/cùi tay 'elbow'; bắp chân 'calf (of the leg)'; đùi 'thigh'; gót chân 'heel' (cf. gân gót 'tendon, Achilles heel...'); nắm tay 'fist'. And, although there are specific 'finger' words, e.g. ngón tay cái 'thumb', ngón tay út 'little finger', one can easily manufacture parallels like 'big toe', 'little toe', etc., by substituting chân for tay. And so on. The versatility is immense, as is readily shown by the Tiếng Việt.


10. The use of the 'eye' as a node of the bamboo (e.g. Bonet loc.cit., mạt tre 'nœud de bambou'; Huê 1937:555a2, ibid.; Gouin 1957:801b. ff.) and sometimes as the joint of a part of the body and so on, is also well observed throughout South-East Asian languages (see i.a., Shorto 1962:170a ff.; 1971:284ff.; Moussay 1971:224).


12. In Malay, one apparently circles the leg to form an ankle (Wilkinson 1932:1, 338a, gelang, cf. 290a; 496a kaki) but the 'anklebone' is still the mata kaki 'eye of the leg' (loc. cit., & II, 11a, mata). The thought that the Vietnamese mạt cà might embalm an MP variant of this is farfetched (even given the *proto-language forms being proposed at present) because of the distinctly Mon-Khmer word for 'leg' in Vietnamese.

13. In Bahnar, I understand that */^kpa:ŋ/ is a possible reconstruction. Might this imply a MK k- 'body' prefix which is now lost in modern Vietnamese?

14. Pacoh deals where relevant with bones but does not seem to have a special term for the 'anklebone'. (Watson 1979:382; cf. parreat (ati).).

15. Note that h- /h-/ and kh- /X/ variants are common in Vietnamese, e.g. n.1 above.

16. Relevant, too, are the semantic similarities and, to a certain extent, the various reconstructed readings of MSC jiá, jiá (=GSR 630a *káp/káp/kia be on both sides of (Shê); support (Shu);... loan for 6301. all around (Shu) [=jiá,jiá] and especially / tsiep/tsie [=MSC xié] encompass, embrace (Shê); all around (Chouli)).; n.b. GSR 630k, too.
17. But ləa in Anh (1957:510b; Trư 1970:278a4) which implies an original *kl- initial consonant cluster and a shift from it to h- and kh- variants. cf. n.15 above.


19. From the Chinese in which there is 鼻 MSC mà 'eye', reconstructed *miok/miuk/mù (GSR 1036a-c), comes the Hán-Việt múc (de Rhodes 1651:488; múc, vide múc; 483 múc, con màt: olhos: oculi; Trư 1898: q.3, la4, p.50 , t.7 múc màt). En passant, we may note that final -t and -c /k/ are often interchanged, especially in southern Vietnamese dialects.

20. A large Tie-chiu refugee migration -- one which preceded the late nineteenth century influx of Cantonese who then also provided a vast source of vernacular, material culture vocabulary -- is known to have taken place during the Ming dynasty, and Tie-chiu loans to, and pronunciations of Chinese characters in, Vietnamese -- as distinct from the Hán-Việt forms one normally encounters -- are numerous. Many of such words are readily found in Câu (1897: e.g. 374a thao; 380a thâu; 402a thâc; 433b tía 'daddy' [cf. Egerod 1959: no. 159]; 451a toa [cf. Bonet 1899:323b]) and in Trư (1970: e.g. II, 17a măng, etc.) but not all dictionaries are as detailedly precise. En passant, no Tie-chiu words have, it seems been recorded in de Rhodes' Dictionarium, a compilation principally of the northern dialect.

21. As seen in the more risqué or vulgar puns like òi-me for (Paul) Doumer and òi-cua 'crab's arse' for the much despised 'discours'.

22. And its irony. Note the idiom (thành ngû): nguòi,mùc hồn châu 鱼目混珠 'fishes' eyes may be taken for pearls', meaning that true and false are confused. Its main application in both China and Việt-Nam was to people who used fake materials to make counterfeit, 'real'-looking, goods, thus deceiving others. This was usually jewelry for women and girls.

23. Perhaps this also refers obliquely to notice of a lot of Chinese migrant labour?
REFERENCES


