

Tracing the Meanings of Thai Disyllabic Words
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The mono-lingual Dictionary of the Thai language compiled by Thailand's Royal Institute contains a lot of disyllabic words of which the etymology are not provided. The preface states that giving the etymology was a very difficult part of the dictionary compilation because it was impossible to find evidence and literature from every period in the past. There were, therefore, a number of words that could only be roughly traced back to its origin but were as yet undetermined, until further evidence could be found. (Royal Institute 1982) These disyllabic words are still in use, but the origin and meaning of each element in many of them are still unknown. Many have lost their meanings and no longer occur by themselves in the present day language. Many have lost the aspects of meanings. Some are dying out. Some can be found in old works of literature, but their meanings are not known. Some are still being used, with their meanings changed. Others still appear in certain Thai dialects. An investigation of original meanings of the words can be conducted not only by looking into the Thai dialects spoken in Thailand, but also by examining the various Tai dialects spoken outside of Thailand, for example in the southern provinces of China such as Yunnan and Guangxi. However, the original meaning of the elements comprising the disyllabic words can be traced from Chinese language as well, due to the fact that Thai and Chinese are believed to belong historically to the same language family, and also because during their long contact, word loaning must have taken place.

The tracing of Thai disyllabic words from Chinese data helps us understand the meanings of a great number of Thai words. Some of these words in Chinese are found to have the same pronunciation with the Thai words while others have slightly different pronunciation. However, the pronunciation of the Chinese words studied in this paper is based on Archaic Chinese (approximately 1122-207 B.C.) and Ancient Chinese (approximately 601 A.D.) for the reason that the words studied

reflect a relation dating back to the periods of Archaic and Ancient Chinese. The Archaic Chinese pronunciation is given in Dr. Fang-kuei Li's reconstructed forms (Li 1971) and is marked by ** in front of the words, whereas the Ancient Chinese pronunciation is that of Bernhard Karlgren (1957) and is indicated by * before the words. The Thai disyllabic words that can be compared to Chinese words are as follows:

kong(ka:n) กอง(การ) : 工 *kung "work, task"

The Thai word **kong** can be compared to the word *kung in Chinese. It is usually paired with the word **ka:n** which means "work," **kong-ka:n** means "business or concern." In present day Thai, the word is usually used as a denial to mean none of one's business, or it is used to oppose that something is not desirable. For example, This is not our **kong-ka:n**. or What **kong-ka:n** is it of yours?

(kiat)khra:n เกียจคร้าน : 懶 **glan "lazy"

The Thai word **khra:n** can be compared to the word **glan in Chinese. It is usually used together with the word **kiat**, which also means "lazy" to form the semantic doublet **kiat-khra:n**.

kha:p(kiau) คาบ(เกี่ยว) : 盍 **gap "connected with, related to"

The word **kha:p** in Thai has many meanings such as "hold in the mouth" as in **kha:p king-mai** คาบกิ่งไม้ "hold a branch in the mouth," "to be in between" as in **kha:p-sa-mut** คาบสมุทร "peninsula," "to be at a designated point" as in **kha:p-sen** คาบเส้น "on the line." In the sense of **kha:p-kiau** "connected with, related to," however, the word **kha:p** corresponds with the word **gap in Chinese.

(ngo:)ngom (งอ)งม : 儻 *ngam “stupid”

The word **ngom** งม when used by itself as a verb in Thai means “dive to grope for something in the water.” To mean “stupid” as in Chinese, it occurs only in the compound **ngo:-ngom** งองม which is a way of adding a synonym word to define it.

cong(rak) จง(รัก) : 忠 *tjung “loyal”

If the word **cong** means “loyal” as the word *tjung does in Chinese, the person who **cong-rak** is the one who has both loyalty and love (**rak**).

The sound correspondence between the initial consonants of the above Thai and Chinese words is normal because the Thai initial consonants **t-** and **c-** can be interchanged. In Thai, the words that contain interchangeable initial consonants **t-** and **c-** are, for example, **ta-kha:p** ตะขาบ and **ca-kha:p** จะขาบ “centipede,” and **ta-khe:** ตะเห่ and **ca-khe:** จะเห่ “crocodile.”

(ru:)cak (รู้)จัก : 識 *sjek “know, recognize”

The word **cak** จัก in Thai has several meanings: “to make notches on the edge like the teeth of a saw,” “to split bamboo or rattan stems into fine strips with a knife,” “to know, recognize, remember.” It can also function as a modal to indicate future tense. When the word **cak** จัก is paired with the word **ru:** รู้ as in **ru:-cak** รู้จัก, it means “to know, to recognize.” When it is put together with more than one word as in **ru:-cak-mak-ci:** รู้จักมักจี, it means “to be familiar with or on intimate terms with;” that is, the meaning comes from the additional attached words **mak** มัก and **ci:** จี. Both **mak** มัก and **ci:** จี correspond with the word 慕 **mag “to like, love” and 知 *tie “to know, to be familiar with, to be intimate with.”

(cap)cau (จับ)เฉ่า: 抓 *tsau “(bird) to perch, grasp”

In Thai, the word **cau** เฉ่า always occurs with other words such as **cap-cau** จับเฉ่า “(of a bird) to perch, grasp” and **nang-cau** นั่งเฉ่า or **cau-cuk** เฉ่าจุก “(of a person) to sit still and look forlorn.” The word **cau** เฉ่า in all these cases could be the same word as the Chinese word *tsau.

(cun)cia (จุน)เจือ: 佐 *tsa “to assist, help”

The word **cia** เจือ in the compound word **cun-cia** จุนเจือ or **cia-ca:n** เจือจาน probably corresponds with the Chinese word *tsa. The word **cun-cia** จุนเจือ, therefore, means “to provide help and support.” **ciaca:n** เจือจาน means “to assist and lend a hand.”

(ya:p)cha: (หยาบ)ห่า: 粗 **dzag “coarse, rough”

The final **g in this Archaic Chinese reconstructed form disappeared in the Western Han Dynasty (206-24 B.C.). In studying the sound correspondences between Thai and Archaic Chinese, the sound **ag in Archaic Chinese usually corresponds to the sound -a: in Thai (Prapin 1975:195-6). As a result, the word **cha:** ห่า should be the same word as **dzag in Chinese, i.e. it is a synonym of **ya:p** หยาบ “coarse, rough.”

(sæ:):sɔ:ng (แซ่)ซ้อง: 頌 *zjwong “to praise, eulogize”

The word **sɔ:ng** ซ้อง in the sense of “to praise” is usually paired with the word **sæ:แซ่** which means “to be too noisy to catch to word,” and become the compound word **sæ:-sɔ:ng** แซ่ซ้อง meaning “to shout praises.”

thot(thɔ:i) ถด(ถอย) : 退 *thəd “to retreat”

In tracing the original meaning of the word ถดถอย from the Chinese words, a two-tier relationship was seen between Thai and Chinese. The word **thot** ถด corresponds to the Archaic Chinese word **thəd “to retreat.” The word **thɔ:i** ถอย corresponds to the Ancient Chinese word *thuai “to retreat.” In Ancient Chinese, certain final consonants that had occurred in Archaic Chinese no longer occurred. In this case, the final consonant **-d has disappeared and thus brought about a sound change from **thəd to *thuai. The synonym compound **thot-thɔ:i** ถดถอย in Thai, besides the meaning “to retreat,” is frequently used in its extended meaning “to become smaller in size or extent, to lessen.”

(dæ:ng)thiak (แดง)เดือด : 赤 *thjiak “red, fire red”

Presently the Thai word **thiak** เดือด is used in the sense of “all over” (it modifies the word **dæ:ng** แดง “red” as in **dæ:ng-thiak** แดงเดือด). This word must have derived from the Chinese word **thjiak. The word **thiak** เดือด not only appears in the synonym compound **dæ:ng-thiak** แดงเดือด, but also in the old literary works. However, the meaning is not known because it is now obsolete. Supposing that **thiak** เดือด has the above meaning, the word **thiak thin-na-kɔ:n** เดือดทินกร and **thiak-thɔ:ng** เดือดทอง that appear in old literature can then be translated as “the sun which is fire red” and “thorough red,” respectively.

(tha:p)tha:m (ทาบ)ทาบ : 談 *dam “to talk”

The word **tha:m** ทาบ in the compound word **tha:p-tha:m** ทาบทาบ means “to sound out (someone), to ask in advance.” This word which never appears by itself could be corresponding with the word *dam “to talk” in Chinese.

thiau(pai)thiau(ma:) เทียว(ไป)เทียว(มา): 佻 ***dieu** “going and coming”

The word **thiau** เทียว in Thai usually occurs with the word **pai** ไป “to go” and **ma:** มา “to come” as in **thiau-pai-thiau-ma:** เทียวไปเทียวมา, meaning “walking back and forth, going and coming” which also is the meaning of ***dieu**.

(lam-ba:k-ya:k)na:n (ลำบากยาก)นาน: 難 ***nan** “difficult”

The word **ya:k-na:n** ยากนาน, according to the Dictionary of the Royal Institute (1982), means “very difficult.” When comparing the Thai word **na:n** นาน with ***nan**, which means “difficult” in Chinese, **lam-ba:k-ya:k-na:n** ลำบากยากนาน should be a compound that consists of three synonym words, that is, **lam-ba:k** ลำบาก, **ya:k** ยาก and **na:n** นาน, all meaning “difficult.”

riak(suan) เรือก (สวน): 疇 ***drjəg** “the land that has been ploughed and raked or the land that is suitable for planting”

The corresponding Chinese word for **riak** เรือก has double initial consonants **dr-. Because such double initial consonant sounds do not occur in Thai, **dr- was broken into d- (**thiak** เทือก) and r- (**riak** เรือก). The word **thiak** เทือก has a similar meaning to the Chinese word ****drjəg** which means the land that has been ploughed, raked and prepared for sowing as in **tham-thiak-thok-kla:** ทำเทือกตกกล้า. The word **riak** เรือก is used in the expression **riak-suan** เรือกสวน meaning “orchard.” The word **riak** เรือก in **riak-suan** เรือกสวน does not have any special meaning. If **riak** เรือก is considered to come from the Chinese word ****drjəg** like the word **thiak** เทือก, it can mean the

same, that is, the land that has been ploughed and raked or the land that is suitable for planting.

The word **riak** เรือก, moreover, can supposedly come from another Chinese word 宅 ****drak**, which means “a place for settlement.” In an agricultural country like Thailand, the people who have **riak-suan-rai-na: เรือกสวนไร่นา** are considered to be well-off because they have both a place for settlement and land suitable for planting, i.e. **suan** สวน “orchard,” **rai** ไร่ “farm” and **na: na** นา “rice field.”

ʔok(kai) ok(ไก) : 屋 ***ʔuk** “house”

(ʔok)kai (ok)ไก : 架 ***ka** “ridge or framework of a house”

The word **ʔok-kai okไก** in Thai means “ridgepole.” Thai people usually explain that it is called **ʔok-kai okไก** “chicken breast” because this wooden form looks like the chest of a chicken. This word probably comes from the Chinese word 屋架 ***ʔuk *ka**, a compound of the word ***ʔuk** “house” and ***ka** “the ridge of a house.” The Chinese word ***ʔuk *ka** is used to call the wood that is used to form the ridge or framework of a house.

phi:n(sia) phin(เสียด) : 忿 ***bjuən** “to get angry”

The word **phi:n phin** in **phi:n-sia phinเสียด** “to get angry” might mean “to be angry with or to be indignant with,” since it corresponds with the Chinese word ***bjuən** that has the same meaning.

(kra?)dai (กระได) : 梯 ***thiei** “stairway”

The Thai word **dai ได** probably corresponds with the Chinese word ***thiei**. The syllable **kra? กระ** in the word **kra?-dai กระได** is supposedly shortened from the first syllable in the Laotian word **khan-dai ขันได** which also means stairway.

(kæ:ng)som (แกง)ส้ม: 酸 *sam “sour”

Generally when talking about the sour taste in Thai, the word **priau**เปรี้ยว “sour” is used. In fact, another word in Thai that also means sour is **som** ส้ม. But the word never appears by itself in this sense. In general when we say **som** ส้ม, we usually refer to the fruits in the orange family such as sour orange and tangerines. The word **som** ส้ม in the sense of sour taste is used in a few compound nouns such as **kæ:ng-som** แกงส้ม “a soup of which the main taste is sour,” **tam-som** ตำส้ม or **som-tam** ส้มตำ “sour-tasted papaya salad,” and **nam-som-sai:-chu:** น้ำส้มสายชู “vinegar.” The word **som** ส้ม in the above three words retain the original meaning “sour” and corresponds with the Chinese word *sam which sounds and means similarly.

pa:u(rɔ:ng) ป่าว(ร้อง): 報 *pau “to announce, to report”

The word **pa:u** ป่าว in Thai corresponds to the Chinese word *pau “to announce, to report.” This word in Thai usually occurs with another word as in **pa:u-rɔ:ng** ป่าวร้อง or **pa:u-pra-ka:t** ป่าวประกาศ “to announce publicly.”

(ʔuan)phi: (อ้วน)พี: 肥 *bjwei “fat”

This word **phi: พี** in Thai corresponds with the Chinese word *bjwei “fat.” In Thai it does not appear by itself but is usually paired with the word ʔuan อ้วน “fat” as in ʔuan-phi: อ้วนพี.

(saʔ)phai (สะ)ไ้: 婦 *bjəu “daughter-in-law”

This word is a disyllabic word of which the first syllable **saʔ สะ-** is supposedly shortened from the original word **sa:u** สาว “maiden” in **sa:u-phai** สาวไ้ that also means daughter-in-law.

(cha:ng)phiak (ช้างเผือก : 白 *bok “white”

The word **phiak** เผือก probably corresponds to the Chinese word ***bok** “white.” This word in the sense of white is normally used to describe certain animals that have abnormal white skin such as **cha:ng-phiak** ช้างเผือก “white elephant,” and **khwa:i-phiak** ควายเผือก “white water buffalo.”

ทว:(su:) ต่อ(สู้) : 鬥 *tau “to fight, wrangle”

The word **ทว:** ต่อ that means “to fight against, to face” does not appear by itself in Thai but occurs with other words as in **ทว:-kw:n ต่อกร** “to fight with someone” **ทว:-ta:n ต่อต้าน** “to fight against” and **ทว:-su: ต่อสู้** “to fight.” In the past the verb **ทว:** ต่อ could be found to occur by itself. For example, **sing-cau-ma:- ทว:-duai-pho:-dai** ซึ่งเจ้ามาต่อด้วยพ่อได้ “that you dare to fight with me, your father” in **Ramayana** which was composed in the reign of King Rama I (A.D.1782-1809). The word **ทว:** ต่อ should be the same word as ***tau** in Chinese.

ru:t(khlo:n) รูด(โคลน) : 摳 *luat “to scrape off”

The sound correspondence between the initial consonants of this Chinese-Thai pair is normal because there is a sound correspondence between **r-** ร- and **l-** ล- to some extent. The word **ru:t** รูด in the Thai language is similar to the Chinese word ***luat** as in **ru:t-khlo:n รูดโคลน** “to scrape off the mud.”

chan(phe:n) ฉน(เพล) : 餐 *tshan “to eat”

The Chinese word ***tshan** means “to eat” in general. In Thai, the word **chan** ฉน “to eat” is specifically used for the monks, thus **chan-phe:n ฉนเพล** means monks partaking the forenoon meal.

sak(tha:m) ซัก(ถาม) : 索 *sak “to ask”

The word **sak** ซัก here corresponds with *sak “to ask” in Chinese. It is used alone by itself in this meaning only when it is obvious in the context that it means “to ask.” However, it is generally paired with other words as in **sak-tha:m** ซักถาม “to ask, to interrogate” and **sak-sai** ซักไซ “to cross-question.”

sa:n(sen) ซ่าน(เซ็น) : 散 *san “to be scattered”

The word **sa:n** ซ่าน should be the same word as *san “to be scattered” in Chinese. This word in Thai usually occurs with other words as in **sa:n-sen** ซ่านเซ็น “to be scattered, dispersed.”

thiang(pha:) เทียง(ผา) : 城 **djing “wall, city wall”

The word **thiang** เทียง is an old Thai word. It means “wall” as in **thiang-pha:** เทียงผา “stone wall.” The word **djing meaning “wall” is also an Archaic Chinese word. Presently, 城 in Chinese is generally used to mean “city” which is its extended meaning. The word 城 in the sense of wall remains in some words such as **Changcheng** “the Great Wall.”

(na:)pha:k (หน้า)ผาก : 顙 **blag “forehead”

The initial consonant in the Proto-Tai reconstruction of the word **pha:k** ผาก is a double initial consonants *phl-(Li 1977:88) which corresponds to the initial **bl- of the Chinese word meaning “forehead.” The word **pha:k** ผาก in present day Thai does not appear alone in this sense, except in **na:-pha:k** หน้าผาก “forehead.”

rak(ræ:) รัก(แร้) : 腋 **rak “the arm-pits”

This word in present day Thai is a disyllabic word. Other Thai dialects such as White Tai, Black Tai and Sak all use the second syllable of this word to mean the arm-pits (Prapin 1975:267). Therefore, it is possible that **rak-ræ:** รักแร้

“arm-pits” is a compound that consists of two words which have the same meaning.

From all examples mentioned in this paper, we can see that tracing the origin and meaning of the words using Chinese data enables us to know the true meaning of the elements in the disyllabic words, thus helps us to understand the meanings of the whole words better. One interesting observation from this study is that more than half of the disyllabic words of which the element corresponds to a Chinese word are compound words of synonyms or near-synonymic words. It is worth studying further and finding out whether the correspondence of these words are due to the fact that Thai and Chinese were genetically related, or to the fact that word borrowing had taken place during their long contact.

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