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 Karlgen (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)  กัง(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  เกี่ยงحن : 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)  ขาย(เกี่ยว) : 糠 **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  ขยับใส่ “hold a branch in the mouth,” “to be in between” as in kha:p-sa-mut  แควสมุทร “peninsula,” “to be at a designated point” as in kha:p-sen  แควเส้น “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.
The word **ngam “stupid”**

The word **ngom งอม** 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 **ngom** which is a way of adding a synonym word to define it.

**Cong(rak) จงรัก** : 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 ตะขาป** and **ca-kha:p ชะขาป** “centipede,” and **ta-khe: ตะเพ** and **ca-khe: ชะเพ** “crocodile.”

**Cak จัก** : **srek “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:** 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:** รู้จักสามี, it means “to be familiar with or on intimate terms with;” that is, the meaning comes from the additional attached words **mak สามี** and **ci:** สามี. Both **mak สามี** and **ci:** สามี correspond with the word **mag “to like, love” and tie “to know, to be familiar with, to be intimate with.”**
(cap)cau (จับ)เท้า: 抓 *tsau "(bird) to perch, grasp"
In Thai, the word cau เทา always occurs with other words such as cap-cau จับเท้า “(of a bird) to perch, grasp” and nang-cau นั่งเท้า or cau-cuk เตาจุก “(of a person) to sit still and look forlorn.” The word cau เตา in all these cases could be the same word as the Chinese word *tsau.

(cun)cia (ชู)เฉิด: 佐 *tsa “to assist, help”
The word cia เทิด in the compound word cun-cia จูเฉิด or cia-ca:n เจาหนำ probably corresponds with the Chinese word *tsa. The word cun-cia จูเฉิด, therefore, means “to provide help and support.” cia:ca:n เจาหนำ means “to assist and lend a hand.”

(ya:p)cha (หยาบ)ขา: 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: ขา should be the same word as **dzag in Chinese, i.e. it is a synonym of ya:p หยาบ “coarse, rough.”

(_sound:song (แข็ง)ช่อง: 頌 *zjwong “to praise, eulogize”
The word song ช่อง in the sense of “to praise” is usually paired with the word สั่ง which means “to be too noisy to catch to word,” and become the compound word สั่ง-ส่ง ช่อง meaning “to shout praises.”
thot(thro:i)  ถอด(ฉบับ) : 退 *thød “to retreat”

In tracing the original meaning of the word ถอด from the Chinese words, a two-tier relationship was seen between Thai and Chinese. The word thot ถอด corresponds to the Archaic Chinese word ismet “to retreat.” The word thro:i ฉบับ corresponds to the Ancient Chinese word ^Kthuai  “to retreat.” In Ancient Chinese, certain final consonants that had occurred in Archaic Chinese no longer occurred. In this case, the final consonant ismet has disappeared and thus brought about a sound change from ismet to ^Kthuai. The synonym compound thot-thro:i ถอดฉบับ 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)เท้าก : 赤 *thjiak “red, fire red”

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

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

The word tha:m ทบทวน in the compound word tha:p-tha:m ทบทวน 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): เที่ยวไปเที่ยวมา: 俳 *dieu “going and coming”

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

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

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

riak(suan) เรือ(สวน): 船 *drjog “the land that has been ploughed and raked or the land that is suitable for planting”

The corresponding Chinese word for riak เรือ 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 เรือ). The word thiak เทือก has a similar meaning to the Chinese word **drjog which means the land that has been ploughed, raked and prepared for sowing as in tham-thiak-thok-kla: ที่เทือกตกคล้า. The word riak เรือ is used in the expression riak-suan เรือสวน meaning “orchard.” The word riak เรือ in riak-suan เรือสวน does not have any special meaning. If riak เรือ is considered to come from the Chinese word **drjog 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 รีแก, 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: เรือนสวนไร่นา 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 ไร “farm” and na: นา “rice field.”

?qok(kai) อค(ไล) : 屋 *?uk “house”
(?qok)kai (อคไล) : 架 *ka “ridge or framework of a house”

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

phi:n(sia) พิน(เสีย) : 怒 *bju:n “to get angry”

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

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

The Thai word dai ได probably corresponds with the Chinese word *thiei. The syllable kra? กระ in the word kra?-dai กระใต is supposedly shortened from the first syllable in the Laotian word khan-dai ạnhใต which also means stairway.
(kæːŋ)som (แกงส้ม) sink *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 ช้ม. But the word never appears by itself in this sense. In general when we say som ช้ม, we usually refer to the fruits in the orange family such as sour orange and tangerines. The word som ช้ม in the sense of sour taste is used in a few compound nouns such as kæːŋ-som แกงต้ม “a soup of which the main taste is sour,” tam-som ต้มช้ม or som-tam ช้มต้ม “sour-tasted papaya salad,” and nam-som-sai:-chu: น้ำส้มสายชู “vinegar.” The word som ช้ม in the above three words retain the original meaning “sour” and corresponds with the Chinese word *sam which sounds and means similarly.

paːu(รอːง) ป่าว(รง) ป่า ป่า: *pau “to announce, to report”

The word paːu ป่า in Thai corresponds to the Chinese word *pau “to announce, to report.” This word in Thai usually occurs with another word as in paːu-รอːง ป่าว(รง) or paːu-praːkaːt ป่าวประกาศ “to announce publicly.”

(?uan)phi: (ธวน)ฟี: 肥 *bjwei “fat”

This word phi: ฟี in Thai corresponds with the Chinese word *bjwei “fat.” In Thai it does not appear by itself but is usually paired with the word ?uan ช้าน “fat” as in ?uan-phi: ช้านฟี.

(sa?)phai (สะใภ) บ่อ: *bjou “daughter-in-law”

This word is a disyllabic word of which the first syllable sa? สะ- is supposedly shortened from the original word saːn สา “maiden” in saːn-phai ธิดา that also means daughter-in-law.
(chaːng)phiak (ข้าง)เหล็ก: 白 *bok “white”

The word phiak เหล็ก 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 chaːng-phiak ข้างเหล็ก “white elephant,” and khwaːi-phiak ควายเหล็ก “white water buffalo.”

tɔː(son): ต่อ(สู้): ɾŋ *tau “to fight, wrangle”

The word tɔː: ต่อ that means “to fight against, to face” does not appear by itself in Thai but occurs with other words as in tɔː:-kɔm ต่อกร “to fight with someone” tɔː:-tɔn ต่อต้าน “to fight against” and tɔː:-son: ต่อสู้ “to fight.” In the past the verb tɔː: ต่อ could be found to occur by itself. For example, sing-cau-maː:- tɔː:-duai-phɔː:-dai ซิ่งแคม่าต่อถิ่นพ่อได้ “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 tɔː: ต่อ should be the same word as *tau in Chinese.

ruː:t(khloːn) รูด(โคลน): 将 *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 ruː:t รูด in the Thai language is similar to the Chinese word *luat as in ruː:t-khloːn รูดโคลน “to scrape off the mud.”

chan(pheː:n) ฉัน (เพล): 餐 *tshan “to eat”

The Chinese word *tshan means “to eat” in general. In Thai, the word chan ฉัน “to eat” is specifically used for the monks, thus chan-pheː:n ฉันผ่า 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 ซักใส่ “to cross-question.”

sa:n(sen) ลาน(เช่น): 散 *san “to be scattered”

The word sa:n ลาน 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 ลานเช่น “to be scattered, dispersed.”

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

The word thiang เทิ่ง is an old Thai word. It means “wall” as in thiang-phá: เทิ่งผา “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)ผา: 項 **blag “forehead”

The initial consonant in the Proto-Tai reconstruction of the word pha:k ผา: 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 ผา: in present day Thai does not appear alone in this sense, except in na:-pha:k หน้าผา: “forehead.”

rak(ræ:) รก(ระ): 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: รกอร
“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.

References