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Notes on the Earliest Sanskrit Word Known in Chinese^{*}

by

Hoong Teik TOH

Instances of Old Indian words phonetically transcribed in Old Chinese constitute the best linguistic evidence for China's early cultural contacts with her western neighbor¹. The importance of even the simple discovery of any of these instances cannot be overstated.

The chapter “Daoying xun” 道應訓 in Fascicle 12 of the *Huainan Zi* 淮南子 gives a list of items given in ransom for King Wen 文王, who was held in custody in Youli 羑里 by Qu Shang 屈商, who himself served the Shang 商 emperor Zhou 紂. The list includes rare, exotic animals and objects that Sanyi Sheng 散宜生, allegedly a minister of King Wen, had acquired at the cost of a thousand units of gold:

- (1) 騶虞
- (2) 雞斯之乘
- (3) 玄玉百工
- (4) 大貝百朋
- (5) 玄豹
- (6) 黃羆
- (7) 青豻
- (8) 白虎文皮

^{*} The following brief notes were written originally in Chinese under the title “Hanchu fangshi suolu gu Yinduyu” 漢初方士所錄古印度語 and are to appear in the author's *Miscellanea historico-philologica (Lishi yuwen luncong chubian 歷史語文論叢初編)*, forthcoming in Beijing. An English translation is here published thanks to the encouragement and help of Victor H. Mair.

¹ Some linguistic evidence for pre-Buddhist Sino-Indian contact/interaction, in the form of five loan translations in Chinese/Sanskrit, has been offered in Zhu Qingzhi, “Some Linguistic Evidence for Early Cultural Exchange between China and India”, *Sino-Platonic Papers* 66, March 1995. I am indebted to Victor Mair for this reference.

Of these, no. (2) “the *jisi* mount” 雞斯之乘 is of particular interest here. Gao You 高誘 (early third century CE) glossed *jisi* as “supernatural horse[s]” (*shenma* 神馬, HNZ: 130a). The *Huainan Zi* was compiled by a large congregation of visiting scholars (*binke fangshu zhi shi* 賓客方術之士)² under the auspices of Liu An 劉安 (179–122 BCE), Prince of Huainan 淮南. The information on the *jisi* horse seems to have reached the Huainan region through this scholarly circle.

The section of *Hainei bei jing* 海內北經 of the *Shanhai jing* 山海經 refers to the piebald horse (*wenma* 文馬) in the country of the Quanrong 犬戎國 as having “a white body, red mane, golden eyes” 縞身朱鬣，目若黃金. In his scholia, Guo Pu 郭璞 (276–324 CE) quotes the *Liutao* 六韜:

[It is] motley, red-maned, golden-eyed, with its neck (that is to say: its mane) like the tail [feathers] of a rooster. It is named the *jisi* mount. 文身朱鬣，眼若黃金，項若雞尾，名曰雞斯之乘。(SHJ 12: 1b)³

He also quotes the *Shangshu dazhuan* 尚書大傳:

[It is] motley, red-maned, with eyes like the rooster’s. 駁身，朱鬣，雞目。(SHJ 12: 1b)

It must be noted that *jisi* is the Old Chinese transcription of Sanskrit *keśī* “the long-haired” < *keśa* “hair, mane.” Here the character *ji* 雞 (Old Chinese **ke*, Middle Chinese **ke*, **kei*) has only the transcriptional value **ke*. Owing to the fact that Chinese *ji* means “chicken,” the Han people were soon led astray to connect the name with the rooster.

The red color of the horse’s mane, emphasized by the Chinese writers, may have

² HS: 2145: 招致賓客、方術之士數千人，作為內書二十一篇，外書甚眾，又有中篇八卷，言神仙黃白之術，亦二十餘萬言. For the term *fangshu zhi shi*, see the remarks on *fangshi* 方士 below.

³ The lost passage of the *Liutao* quoted in Fascicle 93 of the *Yiwen leiju* 藝文類聚 (624 CE), though slightly different from Guo Pu’s, does not differentiate the *jisi* from the piebald horse of the Quanrong. It reads: 得犬戎氏文馬，毫毛朱鬣，目如黃金，名雞斯之乘，以獻商王。“[Sanyi Sheng] acquired the Quanrong’s piebald horse which has fine, red mane, golden eyes, and was named the *jisi* mount, using it as a present for the Shang emperor.”

something to do with the flames of Agni (*R̥g-Veda* X, 136.1: *keśy agniṃ keśī viṣaṃ*). The mythical equine in Hinduism was borrowed into Buddhism and became known, through translation, to Chinese Buddhists later. In the Chinese translation of the *Abhiniṣkramaṇa-sūtra* by Jñānagupta (sixth–seventh centuries CE), the name Keśī is transcribed as *jishi* 雞尸 and glossed as “luxuriant hair” (Cf. Latin *caesariēs* “luxuriant/beautiful hair”). In this *sūtra*, in the section of the stories of the five hundred bhikṣus, Gautama Buddha recalls that one of his previous incarnations was a Pegasus-like horse:

There was a horse king named Keśī (the gloss reads: it means *duofa* 多髮 “luxuriant hair” in the Sui 隋 [i.e. Chinese] language) whose form was handsome and pleasant looking. He was as white as the [snow-white] gemstones and shells. His head was dark red. He moved as swiftly as the wind. His voice was as mellow as [the sound produced by] the finest of drums. [... ...] At that time (Ch. *ershi*, Skt. *tatkāla*), those rākṣasīs, having heard the compassionate voice of the horse king and the sounds of escape like the strong wind, woke up suddenly. Looking all around for the merchants in vain, they finally saw the merchants ride on the back of the horse king—holding onto his hair, mane and members—and make away through the air. [... ...] O bhikṣus! What do you think? Do you wonder who the horse king Keśī was at that time? Do not think otherwise! He was precisely my incarnation. As for the merchant chief among the five hundred men, he was the incarnation of none other than the bhikṣu Śāriputra. 有一馬王，名曰雞尸 隋言多髮，形貌端正，見者樂觀，白如珂貝，其頭紺黑，行疾如風，聲如妙鼓。 [... ...] 爾時彼諸羅刹女輩，聞彼馬王哀愍之聲，復聞走聲狀如猛風，忽從睡覺，覓彼商人，悉皆不見，處處觀看，乃遙見彼諸商人輩乘馬王上，或執諸毛、髮鬣、支節，乘空而去 [... ...]。諸比丘，於汝意云何？若疑於時雞尸馬王，豈異人乎？勿生異念，即我身是。五百人中大商主者，豈異人乎？即舍利弗比丘是也。 (*Taishō*, No. 190, Vol. 3, pp. 881a, 882a, 882b)

It is philologically intelligible that the Buddhist narrative involving this horse often stresses the virtues of its hair and mane (*keśa*). Thus we read in the anonymously translated scripture *Wuming luocha ji* 無明羅刹集:

On the shoal there was a supernatural horse king [...] whose 84,000 strands of hair all grew long, holding onto which, anyone would be extricated from sufferings [...]. The Buddha is likened to the supernatural horse king: with his stout body symbolizing wholesome virtues and right intention (*samyak-saṃkalpa*), together with his 84,000 strands of virtuous hair symbolizing the “equipoise of mindfulness” (*smṛti-samādhi*), he gives rise to the compassionate heart for all sentient beings. 海渚中有神馬王，[...] 八萬四千諸毛森然俱長，挽捉毛者皆得脫苦 [...]。神馬王者，喻佛以善功德正志堅實肥大之身，以正念定八萬四千諸善之毛，為諸眾生起悲愍心。 (*Taishō*, No. 720, Vol. 16, p. 857b)

The very fact that Sanskrit *keśī* had been introduced into pre-Buddhist China and is well preserved in the *Huainan Zi*, which, to a certain degree, is Daoist-oriented, seems to have escaped the notice of both Buddhist and Daoist scholars in China.

There is good reason to believe that the *fangshi* played a significant role in blending the exotic legend of the *keśī* with that of the Quanrong. Although it is difficult to date the *Shangshu dazhuan* and *Liutao*, it is beyond doubt that the “chicken” interpretation of the name took shape only after the adoption of the transcriptional character *ji*, having little to do with the language of the Quanrong people.

The *fangshi* were those who studied the *fangshu* 方術, which, however, is an elusive term that defies a consistent translation.⁴ In the “Tianxia pian” 天下篇, the concluding chapter of the extant version of the *Zhuang Zi* 莊子, it is implied that the divergent *fangshu* were derived respectively from certain aspects or dimensions of the *daoshu* 道術, the latter representing the

⁴ In “Old and New Daoisms,” *Religious Studies Review* 36/1 (2010): 43–44, Nathan Sivin questions the validity of several English translations of the term *fangshi* such as “specialists,” “magical practitioners,” “recipe gentlemen,” “recipe masters,” “masters of the methods,” “magicians,” etc. (I owe this reference to Victor Mair). There are other translations such as “technicians,” “magico-technicians,” “masters of esoterica,” “masters of formulae,” etc.

holistic *Dao*.⁵ Besides, as we read in the chapter of “Yao wen” 堯問 of the *Xun Zi* 荀子 and the chapter of “Waichu shuo zuo shang” 外儲說左上 of the *Han Fei Zi* 韓非子, *fangshu* could also refer to the practical art of ruling a country.⁶ In addition, *fang* or *fangshu* was related to the *fangji* 方技, i.e. healing professions, such as in the biography of the physician Bian Que 扁鵲 in the *Shi ji* 史記 where the *xi fang zhe* 喜方者 (SJ: 2788) is glossed by Sima Zhen 司馬貞 (eighth century CE, author of the *Shi ji suoyin* 史記索隱) as one who was fond of the healing arts (*fangji*) (SJ: 2789; Zhang Shoujie 張守節 [seventh century CE], in his *Shi ji zhengyi* 史記正義, uses the term *fangshu* instead). Nevertheless, it was claimed that the philosophy of such healers was applicable to politics.⁷ Further, during the Qin 秦 period, some connection between the *fangshu* and *ru* 儒 (“Confucians”) was established. Annotating the “Sima Xiangru liezhuan” 司馬相如列傳 of the *Shi ji*, Sima Zhen made the following remarks:

Ru means “gentle.” It was the epithet for the *shushi*.

儒，柔也，術士之稱。(SJ: 3056)

The fact that the *shushi*, alternatively *fangshi* 方士 or *fangshu shi* 方術士, were given the epithet *ru* was due to their significant role in the transmission of certain branches of knowledge of the “Six Arts” (*Liuyi* 六藝: etiquette, music, archery, chariot-riding, writing, computation). Referring to the “Rulin liezhuan” 儒林列傳 of the *Shi ji* makes this clear:

⁵ ZZ: 164–65: 天下之治方術者多矣。[... ..] 天下之人各為其所欲焉以自為方。悲夫! 百家往而不反, 必不合矣。[...] 道術將為天下裂。“Those in the world who study the *fangshu* have been numerous. [...] They came up with their respective ways (which being partial and secondary) oriented toward fulfilling themselves. Alas! The hundred schools tend to diverge and, surely, will never turn to converge again. [...] The *daoshu* will soon be torn asunder by them.”

⁶ XZ: 176: 天下不治, 孫卿不遇時也。[...] 方術不用, 為人所疑。“The world was in disorder. Sun Qing (= Xun Qing 荀卿) did not meet with a good chance. [...] There was no chance for putting his *fangshu* into practice while people were suspicious and jealous of him.” HFZ: 273: 卻有術之士 [... ..]. 知治之人不得行其方術, 故國亂而主危。“Those who possess the *shu* are discarded [... ..]. Those who know how to bring order to the country do not have a chance to put their *fangshu* into practice. Therefore the country is in disorder and the king in danger.”

⁷ HS: 1780: 論病以及國, 原診以知政。

Coming to the declining years of the Qin dynasty, the classics were burnt, the *shushi* were buried alive. Thenceforth the Six Arts became incomplete. 及至秦之季世，焚詩書，阬術士，六藝從此缺焉。(SJ: 3116)

Again, the *Huainan Hengshan liezhuan* 淮南衡山列傳 of the *Shi ji* reads:

Previously, the Qin eradicated the *dao* of the sages [of antiquity], killed the *shushi*, burned the classics, abandoned etiquette and righteousness [... ...]. 昔秦絕聖人之道，殺術士，燔詩書，棄禮義 [... ...]。(SJ: 3086)

To translate *ru* 儒 as “Confucian scholars [of the Lu 魯 tradition]” within a Qin-Han context is misleading. This, again, will become obvious if we read the following words of the First Emperor (*Shihuangdi* 始皇帝) recorded in the “Qin Shihuang benji” 秦始皇本紀:

Earlier, I confiscated the practically useless books of the whole State, leaving all of them [inaccessible to the commoners]. [I] summoned numerous men-of-letters (*wenxue[shi]* 文學[士]) and *fangshu shi*, wishing to use [the former] to glorify prosperity and the *fangshi* (the latter) to concoct and seek marvelous [longevity] medicine. 吾前收天下書不中用者盡去之，悉召文學方術士甚眾，欲以興太平，方士欲練以 (sic! Probably: 以練) 求奇藥。(SJ: 258)

Later, the *fangshi* who remained in Xianyang 咸陽, the capital of Qin, were said to have been buried alive by imperial order as their colleagues failed to acquire longevity elixirs through experiments and expeditions. It is conceivable that the *fangshi* sent into the sea to search for immortals and longevity herbs/materials on distant islands (which might have been *terra incognita* at that time) included not only alchemists and physicians, but also those conversant with other *technai* (plural of Greek *techne*) such as navigation, mathematics, astronomy, and geography.

The *fangshi* who were so popular in the Han period also contributed to rites and rituals. The “Jiaosi zhi” 郊祀志 of the *Han shu* 漢書 reads:

The Aidi emperor (27–1 BCE) ascended the throne. When he was bound to his sickbed, he had the *fangshu shi* recruited extensively [for his service]. Royal messengers were installed in every district’s shrines within the capital. Officers in charge of the shrines which flourished in previous times, altogether more than 700, were reinstalled. It was said that 37,000 sacrifices were performed within one year. 哀帝即位，寢疾，博徵方術士，京師諸縣皆有侍祠使者，盡復前世所常興諸神祠官，凡七百餘所，一歲三萬七千祠云。(HS: 1264)

Further, we read in the biography of Wang Bao 王褒 in the *Han shu*:

The *fangshi* said that there was the treasure (*bao*; the “Jiaosi zhi” 郊祀志 reads *shen* 神 “spirit,” HS: 1250) of the *jinma biji* in Yizhou (present-day Sichuan), which could be invoked through performing sacrificial rites. The Xuandi emperor (91–49 BCE) sent Wang Bao (who hailed from Sichuan) to make the offering. 方士言益州有金馬碧雞之寶，可祭祀致也，宣帝使褒往祀焉。(HS: 2830)

According to the “Dili zhi” 地理志 of the *Han shu* and the “Xinanyi liezhuan” 西南夷列傳 of the *Houhan shu* 後漢書, the “lustrous shadow” (*guangying* 光景) of the *jinma biji* appeared near the Yutong mountain 禺同山 of the Qingling district 青蛉縣 in Yuesui 越巂, Yizhou (HS: 1600; HHS: 2852). The *jinma biji* means, literally, “golden horse, bluish rooster.” It seems tempting to speculate that the *jinma biji* was the Sichuan–Yunnan variation of the Hindu *keśī* which was incorporated into local cults. Perhaps it was due to a misunderstanding of the transcriptional character 雞 or due to confusion with some fowl-like, mythical mount (*āsana*) in Hinduism that the *biji* had come to be perceived as a rooster. If this is the case, it would seem that the *keśī* was transmitted along the ancient trading route between India and Myanmar by the Tibeto-Burman speakers to the Yunnan natives (*Xinan yi* 西南夷) who, in turn, passed it along to the Sichuanese. It is quite unexpected that the *keśī* was not transmitted by the Yuezhi/Rouzhi 月氏 nomads, the Eurasian horse-riders in the north, but traveled along the India–Myanmar–Yunnan route with the “southwestern” breed of horses on which the Sichuan merchants relied heavily in their acquisition of wealth. In the meantime, it cannot be ascertained whether those in

the Indochinese peninsula were then exposed to the Indian equine myth from the sea and might therefore be responsible for transmitting it to the inhabitants of Nanyue 南越 and Minyue 閩越 (present-day Guangzhou and Fujian areas), with whom the Huainanese were in frequent contact.

There is still another possibility. Much of the “*fangshu* for immortality” (*shenxian fangshu* 神僊方術) in vogue in the Qin–Han period was derived from the Qi 齊 culture, which was characterized by a fondness for exotica and the supernatural as well as a yearning for temporal and spatial infinities (immortality, heaven, ocean, etc.). Zou Yan 鄒衍, a contemporary of Mencius and expert in the theory of “Five Elements” (*wude* 五德) from the Qi state, became celebrated as the *fangshi* par excellence during the Han. According to the *Han shu*, Liu An’s “pillow book” on alchemy and longevity elixirs (*Zhenzhong Hongbaoyuan mishu* 枕中鴻寶苑秘書) fell into the possession of Gengsheng 更生 (Liu Xiang 劉向, ca. 77–6 BCE), who found Zou Yan’s longevity formulae (*Zhongdao yanming fang* 重道延命方) therein (HS: 1928–29). In 1977, Professor Jao Tsung-i suggested a possible connection between Zou Yan’s *yanming fang* with the notion of *amṛta* of the *R̥g-Veda*.⁸ There is a chance that the *jisi* passage was based on Zou Yan’s writings and that Sanskrit *keśī* was already known to the Qi scholars of the Warring States Period. However, the existence of Qi-Indian contacts remains open to question until we can find indisputable evidence for it.

It can be tentatively decided that the Chinese *fangshi* first came to record Vedic Sanskrit *keśī* in the second century BCE or slightly earlier. Should any bamboo slip text unearthed in the future allow a “text-historical” (*textgeschichtlich*) analysis of the “Daoying xun” chapter and point to a pre-Qin origin of the *jisi* passage, the introduction of the Old Indian word into China can then be dated earlier.

Supplementary Notes

Sanskrit *kaiśika* “fine as a hair,” also derived from *keśa*, refers to one of the Indian musical notes (*rāga*). The Chinese historians of the seventh century CE listed seven musical

⁸ Rao Zongyi (Jao Tsung-i) 饒宗頤, “Busi (*a-mṛta*) guannian yu Qixue: Zou Yan shu bie kao” 不死 (*a-mṛta*) 觀念與齊學: 鄒衍書別考; see *Fanxue ji* 梵學集, Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1993, pp. 53–54.

notes (*qidiao* 七調) of the Kuccean musical instrument (*Qiuci pipa* 龜茲琵琶), the second of them being *jishi* 雞識. (See the section on music *Yinyue zhi* 音樂志 of the *Sui shu* 隋書, SS: 345–46.) It must be pointed out that the Chinese transcription was not based on Sanskrit but rather on Kuccean (Tocharian B) *keśik*.

Professor Victor Mair has offered the following notes: The “chicken” character for Sanskrit KE carries through to the medieval period, e.g.: 鷄舍鉢喇底揭喇湯呵 *keśa-pratigrahaṇa*; 鷄舍盧歇醯 *keśa-rohe*; 鷄薩梨 *keśarin*; 鷄薩羅 *keśara*. Keśin (or just Keśī) means “having a mane or hair”; n. of a horse demon that was killed by Kṛṣṇa. *R̥g-Veda* X.136 is dedicated to the Keśins. In *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* V.16, a *daitya* (giant or titan; post-Vedic) who assumed the form of a horse to attack Kṛṣṇa, but Kṛṣṇa thrust his arm into its jaws and tore it in two, so that is why he was called Keśava. In *Atharva-veda* XI.2, 18, he is said to possess dark horses. 雞斯之乘 is mistranslated as “the *jisi* chicken” on p. 466 of the new *Huainan Zi* translation, *The Huainanzi: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Government in Early Han China*, by Liu An, *King of Huainan*, translated and edited by John S. Major, Sarah A. Queen, Andrew Seth Meyer, Harold D. Roth, Michael Puett, and Judson Murray (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

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