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## Some Linguistic Evidence for Early Cultural Exchange between India and China

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## Some Linguistic Evidence for Early Cultural Exchange between China and India

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The cultural exchange between ancient China and India is one of the most important areas in Asian Studies. About this topic, everyone knows well the so-called "Buddhist conquest of China"<sup>[1]</sup> or "Indianized China"<sup>[2]</sup> which, according to the Chinese tradition, started around the beginning of our era. Then what about before the Buddhist conquest? Was there any contact between China and India before Buddhism officially came? Unfortunately, both Chinese and Indian historical works fail to provide us any definite evidence, and archeologists cannot yet find enough materials to give us a relatively clear picture about this issue. Even so, is there anybody who believes that the coming of Buddhism was just the beginning of the exchange between these two cultures? No, absolutely not. It is not only because these two countries are so close in geography (they are close neighbors now, but even in ancient times, they were not far from each other). Furthermore, long before our era, the people of China and India had the material conditions necessary to come into contact mutually.

Let us look at the great Shang-Zhou 商周 civilization, which occurred in China during the period 1500-1000 BCE, and the great contemporaneous Vedic civilization in India. Both were among the highly developed cultures of the world. During the 6th century BCE, the birth of Confucius, the founder of Confucianism, took place in China and that of Śākyamuni, the founder of Buddhism, took place in India. Let us also look at what we find in Central Asia, or Serindia, where thousands of Indo-European immigrants lived 4000 years ago. In brief, there is no doubt that the Indian Buddhist conquest is only the biggest, but not the earliest, evidence for the cultural exchange between the two countries. The question is how we can prove this.

As a part of the effort by which we may try to prove it, my article will show some linguistic evidence. There are five loan translations in Chinese or Sanskrit which appeared before the Common Era. I must preface my remarks by telling you that, although I believe these words are loan translations in Chinese or Sanskrit, I am not totally sure in almost all cases which is the original and which is the target.

### *Wumingzhi* 無名指 in Chinese and *Anāmā* in Sanskrit

In Chinese, the five fingers are successively called *dazhi* 大指 ("bigfinger"), *shizhi* 食指 ("eating finger"), *zhongzhi* 中指 ("middle finger"), *wumingzhi* 無名指 ("nameless finger"), and *xiaozhi* 小指 ("little finger"). Among them, the name of *wumingzhi* is obviously quite strange. To my knowledge, this has been the only name for the fourth finger in Chinese all

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along, and it had already appeared in the "Gaozi 告子" section of *Mengzi* 孟子 (*The Doctrine of Mencius*, 400-300 BCE): "Now, there is the nameless finger which just bends but does not extend." (今有無名之指，屈而不伸) In his commentary on *Mengzi*, Zhao Qi 趙岐 (108-201 CE) says: "The nameless finger is the fourth finger of the hand." (無名之指，手之第四指也)

It is very interesting that in ancient India the same finger was also called "nameless (finger)," i.e., *anāmā* or *anāmikā* in Sanskrit, *anāmikā* in Pali. All these are compound words composed of the negative prefix *a-*, corresponding to English "un-," and *-nāmā* / *-nāmikā*, which means "name." Vaman Shivram Apte says in his *Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary*: "So called because it has no name like the other fingers."<sup>[3]</sup> According to Apte's Dictionary, Monier Monier-Williams' *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*<sup>[4]</sup> and *An English-Sanskrit Dictionary*<sup>[5]</sup>, and T. W. Rhys David's *Pali-English Dictionary*<sup>[6]</sup>, it has also been the only name for the fourth finger in Sanskrit and Pali all along, and had been used in Vedic literature (before the 5th century BCE).

Could it simply be a coincidence that Chinese and Sanskrit both have such an unusual and specific word? We believe it is the result of the exchange between these two cultures, although it is very difficult to judge which is the original language.

### *Taibai* 太白 in Chinese and *Śukra* / *Śveta* in Sanskrit

Both China and India had well-developed astronomy in ancient times. Already very early there were relatively regular names for the fixed stars of the solar system in Chinese and in Sanskrit. Before the Qin 秦 Dynasty, Venus was called *mingxing* 明星 in Chinese which literally means "dawn star," or *qiming* 啓明, "leading to dawn" or "opening light" which took their meanings from what the people saw just before the daybreak. For example, in *The Classic of Poetry* (*Shi Jing* 詩經), "Odes of Zheng" (*Zheng Feng* 鄭風), "The Good Housewife" (*Nü Yue Ji Ming* 女曰鷄鳴): "'The cocks are crowing,' said the wife; 'It is (but) the twilight of morning,' said he; 'But rise, my gentleman, and look at the sky of the night: the dawn star is (still) shining!' " (女曰鷄鳴，士曰昧旦。子興視夜，明星有爛) Also in the "Minor Festal Odes" (*Xiao Ya* 小雅), "The Neglected Eastern States" (*Da Dong* 大東): "In the east there is the Opener of Light (Lucifer); in the west there is the Long Continuer (Hesperus)." (東有啓明，西有長庚)<sup>[7]</sup> Later, around the Qin and Western Han 西漢 period, another name for Venus appeared in Chinese literature. That is *Taibai* 太白, which literally means "great white." There is an example in *Records of the Grand Historian* (*Shiji* 史記), "Chapter on Astronomers" (*Tianguan Shu* 天官書): "It comes out together in the east with *Taibai*." (其與太白俱出東方) We think this is a loan translation from a certain foreign language which most likely is Sanskrit.

Sanskrit has several names for Venus. Among them *Śukra* and *Śveta* also literally mean "white." For example, the compound word *śukradanta* means "white-toothed," *śuklakeśa* means "white-haired," *śukracāra* "course of the planet Venus," *śukrasuta* "son of the planet Venus," *śvetagiri* "white mountain peak," *śvetapuṣpa* "a white flower," etc. According to M. M. Williams' and V.S. Apte's dictionaries, both of them had been used in Vedic literature, which means they are significantly older in Indian language than *Taibai* in Chinese.

### *Tu* 兔 in Chinese and *Śāsīn* in Sanskrit

In Chinese literature, *tu*, which literally means rabbit, and *yutu* 玉兔 "white rabbit" or "jade rabbit" are often used as synonyms of *yue* 月 which means moon. For example, Wei Cong's (韋琮) "Rhapsody on the Moon Becoming Brighter and the Stars Fewer" (*Yue Ming Xing Xi Fu* 月明星稀賦): "The shadow of the rabbit sparkles on high, the light of the elms (i.e., stars) is submerged in the mists (of the light of the moon)." (兔影高輝, 榆光潛靄) Xin Qiji's (辛弃疾) "Lyric on Mid-Autumn" (*Zhongqiu Ci* 中秋詞): "On purpose I climb the tower to enjoy the jade rabbit." (著意登樓觀玉兔) In general opinion, this usage came from a very specific view in which people considered that there were rabbits on the moon. This can be traced to the Warring States 戰國 period when Qu Yuan 屈原 (339-278 BCE) asked in "Heavenly Questions" (*Tian Wen* 天問): "Why do rabbits live in the hinterland of the moon; are there any advantages?" (厥利唯何而顧兔在腹)

In his thesis entitled "Indian Literature in China" (*Yindu Wenxue Zai Zhongguo* 印度文學在中國)<sup>[8]</sup>, Professor Ji Xianlin 季羨林 of Peking University thinks that the above-mentioned view must have come from India. One of the words for moon in Sanskrit is *Śāsīn*, which literally means "containing a hare." Its root is *śāśa*. The basic meaning of *śāśa* is "hare / rabbit," and it also indicates "the markings on the moon which are supposed to resemble a hare or rabbit."<sup>[9]</sup> All of the compound words which contain *śāśa*, such as *śāśadhara* (literally "bearer of hare-marks"), *śāśabhṛt* ("hare-bearer"), *śāśabindu* ("hare-spotted"), and *śāśalakṣaṇa* ("hare-marked"), indicate the moon. These words had been used in Vedic literature. Here is a later example from the *Pañcatantra* (*A Collection of Ancient Hindu Tales*)<sup>[10]</sup>, book 1, 70th stanza:

*kaūśeyam kṛmijam suvarṇam upalād dūrvāpi goromataḥ  
paṅkāt tāmarasaṃ śāśaṅka udadher indīvaram gomayāt /*

The translation is:

Silk is produced by worms, gold from the lower press stones, and  
durva grass from cow-hair;  
Red-colored lotus grows up in mud, rabbit (the moon) from the sea,  
and blue-colored lotus from cow-dung.

In our opinion, however, we can only say that either *tu* or *śāsīn* is a loan translation, not which is the original or the target, because the time of Qu Yuan in China is not so distant from the late Vedic period in India. Thus, merely on the basis of the time when they appeared in their own languages, it is not enough to reach a firm conclusion about the priority of *tu* and *śāsīn*.

### *Niucen* 牛涇 in Chinese and *Goṣpada* in Sanskrit

*Niucen* in ancient Chinese literally means the rainwater in a small hole made by a bovine hoof. It is often used to indicate "narrow; small and shallow;" or "very limited (in

space, knowledge, etc.)" in distinction to the sea or ocean which conveys breadth and profundity. For example, Huang Tao's (黃滔, Later Tang 晚唐 period) "Letter to Supernumerary Lu" (*Qi Lu Yuanwai* 啓廬員外): "And I am very shallow and detestable just like the rainwater in a small hole made by a bovine hoof; my ability is very limited and insignificant just like a swallow's flitting. How should I try to do a big job, which is useless?" (而滔牛涔淺狹, 燕戲微茫, 豈合攀投, 徒爲激切) The earliest use of this term that we can find in Chinese is from Liu An's (劉安, Western Han 西漢 Dynasty) *Huainanzi* 淮南子, "Fanlun 汜論" section: "In the water of the hole made by a bovine hoof the big fish can not live." (夫牛蹄之涔, 不能生鱣鮪) Gao You 高誘 (Eastern Han 東漢 Dynasty) annotated this as follows: "*Cen* means 'rainwater in the depression made by a bovine hoof.' It indicates that because the water is so little the big fish cannot live in it." (涔, 雨水也, 滿牛蹄中, 言其小也, 故不能生鱣鮪)

This figure of speech certainly must have come from India. There is a word *goṣpada* in Sanskrit and *gopada* / *gopadaka* in Pali which has exactly the same meaning and usage as *niucen* in Chinese. Due to the natural conditions of their environment, Indian people know much more about cattle and the sea than do Chinese people. So this figure of speech is very popular in Indian literature. For example, the *Pañcatantra*, book two, 122nd stanza:

*utsāhaśaktiyutavikramadhairyarāśir*  
*yo vetti goṣpadam ivālpataṛam samudram /*  
*valmīkaśṛṅgasadr̥ṣaṃ ca sadā nagendram*  
*lakṣmīḥ svayaṃ tam upayāti na dīnasattvam //*

The translation is:

If one has a lot of strength and capability  
in addition to might and wisdom,  
who considers the huge ocean as a small and shallow puddle  
made by the the foot of cow,  
and the King of mountains as a low ant-hill,  
the Goddess of fortune and beauty herself will go to him  
and not to the low-spirited.

In Buddhist literature such a figure of speech can be found everywhere. *The Sutra on the Unlimited Changes of the Supernatural-Footsteps* (*Daoshenzu Bianhua Wuji Jing* 道神足變化無極經) translated by An Faqin 安法欽 (Western Jin 西晉 Dynasty) says: "The virtue of the followers cannot be compared with Buddha Lokanātha's virtue, just as one cannot compare a mustard seed with Mount Sumeru, the light of a firefly with the light of the sun or the moon, or the water in a hole made by a bovine hoof with the ocean." (佛世尊之德, 弟子不能及, 不可以須彌方之比芥子、日月之光明比之於螢火; 比之牛迹水, 不可以大海)<sup>[11]</sup> *The Sutra on the Practice of Buddha Compiled by Saṅgharakṣa* (*Senqieluo Suoji Jing* 僧伽羅所集經) translated by Saṅghabhuti 僧伽跋澄 says: "Who will prefer the water in a hole made by a bovine hoof to the ocean?" (誰能舍大海而就牛迹水)<sup>[12]</sup> According to Ogiwara Unrai's (荻原雲來) *A Sanskrit-Japanese Dictionary* (漢

譯對照梵和大辭典), the Sanskrit equivalent of *niujishui* 牛迹水 is also *goṣpada*<sup>[13]</sup>. In comparison with *goṣpada* in Indian literature, the use of *niucen* occurs much less frequently in Chinese literature. Beside, Pali *gopada* / *gopatāka* had already been used in the *Āṅguttara-Nikāya* which was composed during the third century BCE when the Third Conference on the Buddhist Canon was held<sup>[14]</sup>.

### *Niuhuang* 牛黃 in Chinese and *Gorocanā* in Sanskrit

Bezoar, a kind of medicine, is called *niuhuang* in Chinese and *gorocanā* in Sanskrit. Let us look at the literal meanings of *niuhuang* and *gorocanā*. The former is "cow's yellow"; the latter is also "cow's yellow". This indicates that both words surely have some link with one another because they have the same surface meaning and designate the same medicinal substance.

The earliest Chinese texts which mention the word *niuhuang* are *Herbal Pharmacopoeia* (*Bencao* 本草, about 100 BCE) and *History of the Later Han* (*Houhan Shu* 後漢書). In *Houhan Shu*, "The Biography of Yan Du" (*Yan Du Zhuan* 延篤傳), there is this sentence: "The senior general Liang Ji sends his subordinate to the Capital to deliver the letter and purchase bezoar." (大將軍梁冀遣客賚書詣京兆。并貨牛黃) Li Xian 李賢 (Tang 唐 Dynasty) cited a lost *Bencao* in his notes to this passage: "The bezoar tastes bitter without poison. The cow which groans when moving has it." (牛黃, 味苦無毒, 牛出入呻者有之) Therefore, it is quite possible that this word appeared in Chinese before the Common Era.

The time when *gorocanā* was used in Indian literature was not as early as the other words, because it is not found in Vedic literature. Buddhist literature tells us how the Indian monks used bezoar. "At that time, a *bhikṣu* grew a malignant sore on his forehead. He went to the doctor and asked: 'Worthy, prescribe for me, please.' The doctor answered: 'Sage, you can apply bezoar around the sore, then you will recover from it.' " (時有 白額有惡瘡, 往問醫言: "賢首, 爲我處方." 醫人答言: "聖者, 於瘡四邊以牛黃塗之, 即當得差.") This is from the *Mūlasarvāstivāda-nikāya-vinayasāmyuktavastu* (*Genbenshuo Yiqieyoubu Pinaiye Zashi* 根本說一切有部毗奈耶雜事) translated by Yijing 義淨 (Tang Dynasty) which also says. "The Six Groups of *Bhikṣus* with their garments and begging-bowls entered the city to beg in the early morning. When they saw that the Brahmins put some bezoar on their foreheads so they could beg a lot of delicious food, the *bhikṣus* said to one other: 'This is a very good method; we should do like this.' Then they put bezoar on their foreheads when entering the city for begging." (六眾 白於日初分時, 執持衣鉢入城乞食。見婆羅門以牛黃點額, 所有乞求多獲美味。見是已, 共相謂言: '是好方便, 我等宜作.' 遂於他日以牛黃點額, 入城乞食)<sup>[15]</sup> According to Ogiwara Unrai's dictionary, the Sanskrit equivalent of *niuhuang* in Buddhist scripture is *gorocanā*. This is a compound word which consists of *go-*, meaning "cow" and *-rocanā* meaning "yellow(color)." *Rocanā* alone also can indicate bezoar, for example, in the *Pañcatantra*, book 1, 70th stanza:

*kāṣṭad agnir aheḥ phaṇād api maṇir gopittato rocanā*  
*prākāśyaṃ svaguṇodayena guṇino gacchanti kiṃ janmanā //*

The translation is:

Fire is produced from wood, pearl from the hood of a serpent,  
and bezoar from cow's gall bladder;  
one gains advantages by his own virtues and merit,  
what is the use of family background?

The reader can decide for him/herself which is the original.

I have shown five pairs of words in Chinese and in Sanskrit. Everybody knows Chinese and Sanskrit are two extremely different languages. On the one hand, the style and habit of thinking and observing of the peoples who use them are extremely different. On the other hand, each object that the words represent has varied characteristics which can be used for word construction. We do not deny the possibility of coincidence, but in the case of the words in question, the literal meanings of the words in each group are so unique and so similar that such a possibility is virtually nil, especially when we consider the pattern of correspondences of the group as a whole. We believe all of them are the result of early exchange between China and India.

#### Notes

1. E. Zürcher. *The Buddhist Conquest of China: The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1959.
2. Hu Shih. "The Indianization of China," in *Independence, Convergence, and Borrowing in Institutions, Thought, and Art*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1937, pp. 219-247.
3. V. S. Apte. *Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary*. New Delhi: Sri Satgura Publishers (reprint), 1990, p. 267.
4. Monier Monier-Williams. *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers (reprint), 1990.
5. Monier Monier-Williams. *An English-Sanskrit Dictionary*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers (reprint), 1990.
6. T. W. Rhys David. *Pali-English Dictionary*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers (reprint), 1989.
7. Cf. W. Jennings. *The Shi King: The Old "Poetry Classic" of the Chinese*. New York: Paragon Book Reprint Corp. 1969, p. 103 and p. 235; B. Karlgren. *The Book of Odes*. Goteborg: Elanders Boktryckeri Aktiebolag, 1950, p. 55 and p. 155.
8. Ji Xianlin. "印度文學在中國," in *中印文化關係史論文集 (The Collection of the Papers on the History of Sino-Indian Cultural Relations)*. Beijing: Sanlian Shudian 三聯書店, 1982, pp. 121-129.
9. Monier Monier-Williams. *An English-Sanskrit Dictionary*, p.1060.
10. *The Panchatantra: A Collection of Ancient Hindu Tales*, critically edited in the original Sanskrit by Johannes Hertel, Harvard Oriental Series, Vol. 11, published by Harvard University, 1908.
11. *Dao Shenzu Bianhua Wuji Jing*, vol. 3. Taishō edition, vol. 17, p. 809c.



12. *Sengqieluo Suoji Jing*, vol. 3. Taishō edition, vol. 4, p. 135c.
13. Ogiwara Unrai and Tsuji Naoshirō. 漢譯對照梵和大辭典 (*Sanskrit-Japanese Dictionary* [with Parallel Chinese Translation]). Tokyo: Kōdansha 講談社, 1986.
14. T. W. Rhys Davids. *Pali-English Dictionary*, p. 254.
15. *Genbenshuo Yiqieyoubu Pinaiye Zashi*, vol. 1. Taishō edition, vol. 24, p. 208a; p. 207c.

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