Old Chinese *sm- and the Old Tibetan Word for ‘Fire’

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Abstract

Several sinologists have compared Chinese 火 xwaX ‘fire’ to an Old Tibetan word smye ‘fire’. No such Old Tibetan word exists. Instead, mye is the Old Tibetan word for fire and smye, also spelled dmeḥ, means ‘stain, impurity, sin’. Tibetan evidence in this case does not support a reconstruction *sm- in Old Chinese.

Keywords

Old Tibetan, Old Chinese, fire, s- prefix, Or. 15000/265

Résumé

Plusieurs sinologues ont tenté de rapprocher les formes 火 xwiXj ‘brûler’ et 火 xwaX ‘feu’ du chinois de la forme smye du tibétain ancien. Il s’avère que cette dernière forme en tibétain n’a pas le sens de «feu». En effet, le mot en tibétain ancien pour «feu» est mye; la forme smye, également orthographié dmeḥ, renvoie quant à elle au mot «impureté, péché». Ainsi, les données du tibétain ne sauraient conforter la reconstruction *sm- du chinois archaïque.

Mots-clés

tibétain ancien, chinois archaïque, feu, le préfixe s-, Or. 15000/265

Among Sinologists there is a widespread belief that Old Tibetan has a word smye ‘fire’; Gong (2002[1995]: 83), Schuessler (2009: 288) and Mei

1) Here I acknowledge my gratitude to the British Academy for support in the course of the research that led to this paper. I also acknowledge my gratitude to an anonymous reviewer for the suggestion that Thomas (1935-1963) was the source form which smye ‘fire’ entered the Sinological literature.
(2012: 7) cite such a word, comparing it to Chinese 燃烧 xjwjX ‘burn’ or 火 xwaX ‘fire’.

These authors provide no discussion of smye ‘fire’, and make no reference to Tibetan documents or lexicographical resources. A number of citations from Old Tibetan documents make clear that mye is the usual Old Tibetan word for ‘fire’.4

(1) rgyal-mtsan ba-dan mar-myé dkyil-bkhor bśos sañ
victory.banner pendant butter.lamp manḍala offering.cake beer libation spos chab-las stsoys-pha
incense water-ABL etc.
‘victory banner, pendant, butter lamp (lit. ‘butter-fire’), manḍala, offering cake, beer libation, incense, water, etc.’ (Prayers for the foundation of De ga yu tshal, PT 16, folio 24 recto, l. 3)

(2) mar-myé gsol-phasis-na hgro-ba thams-cad-kyī
butter.lamp offering-LOC creature all-GEN ma rig-pahi mun-nag bstsalte
NEG knowing-GEN ignorance dissipate
‘when offering butter lamps (lit. ‘butter-fire’) the dark ignorance of all creatures dissipates’ (PT 16, folio 31 verso, l. 2)

(3) lha Ḥo-de Guṅ-rgyal-gyi žal-nas
god Ḥo-de Guṅ-rgyal-GEN face-ABL
rgyal-po lhas mdzad-na žal mtho /
king god-AGN do-CVB face high
rgyal rgyal hbaṅs-rjes mdzad-na go mtho
king subject-AGN do-CVB face (?) high
lha yul-na mye ḡbar
god land-LOC fire burn
myi yul-na glu len
person land-LOC song take

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2) Mei’s write “WT me < mye < smye ‘fire’” (2012: 7). This form of presentation is ambiguous as to whether he regards smye as an attested form or a reconstruction, but since he does not mark it with an asterix, he probably intends it as an attested form.

3) Chinese romanization conforms to Baxter’s (1992) Middle Chinese transcription. Because the value of the Tibetan evidence for the Old Chinese initial is under discussion, it is prudent to avoid citing an Old Chinese reconstruction.

4) In citations of Tibetan texts, PT refers to the shelf number ‘Pelliot tibétain’ of documents held at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, IOL Tib J refers to the shelf number ‘India Office Library Tibetan J’ of documents held at the British Library, and Or. Refers to the shelf number ‘Oriental’, documents also held at the British Library. All of the documents cited here hail originally from cave 16 of the 莫高 Mògāo caves near 敦煌 Dūnhuáng. This cave was closed in 1006 (Rong 1999-2000).
From the mouth of the god Ho-de Guṅ-rgyal: when the king acts as a god, he raises his visage; when a royal subject acts as the lord, he raises his face. When they make a fire in the land of gods, they sing in the land of men. Human, not finding wealth in your house, take to the road, and you will meet with wealth. This is a good prognosis. ('IOL Tib J 740, ll. 70-72, cf. Dotson 2007: 21-22)

Then, on the first day of the first summer month, the female Fire-Sheep day, at the time of sacrificing to the ancestors of the preceding seven generations. (PT 986, ll. 104-105, cf. Coblin 1991: 309, 314)

On the fourth day of the first summer month, on the male Iron-Dog day, they placed the three types of sacrificial animals on piled-up wood, set fire to it, and sacrificed to Heaven. (PT 986, ll. 106-108, translation from Coblin 1991: 309, 314)
‘The sister of Mdaḥ-ša-grĭ-ba, named Pur-pa-la, had shaggy hair that hung down to the ground; her skin was vile and rough like the hide of a sow, her eyes blazed with fire, and fiery grease dripped from her mouth.’ (Rama A, IOL Tib J 737.1, ll. 119-121, cf. de Jong 1989: 22)

(7) « bdagi pa gźug-ma-la
« me-GEN father tail-ALL
ras yug ston-gis dkrís /
cotton cloth thousand-AGN wind
mar sran khri-hi nañ-du bcug-nas /
butter ounce thousand-GEN inside-TRM place-CVB
mye btan-ste bkuṃ » źes gsol-pa-daṅ /
fire send-CVB kill » quote asking-ASS
Ha-nu-man-ta yanī de bźin bgis-nas /
Hanuman also that like do-CVB
mye ḡbaḥr-ba-daṅ / mjug-ma yug ces byaste /
fire burning-ASS tail cloth quote do-CVB

‘My father’s tail was wrapped in a thousand pieces of cloth and then stuck into ten thousand ounces of butter. Fire was then lit and he was killed.’ They did the same to Hanumanta. The fire burned and he shook his tail vigorously.’ (Rama A, IOL Tib J 737.1, ll. 269-271, cf. de Jong 1989: 35)

When the word smye does occur it does not mean ‘fire’. In example (8) Dotson translates ‘sores’.

(8) Smra-bon-ziṅ-ba-yis /
Smra-bon-ziṅ-ba-AGN
kha smye gāns-la bgrus /
mouth sore snow-ALL wash
lag smye mtsho-las bkrus
hand sore lake-ABL wash

‘(The healer) Smra-bon-ziṅ-ba washes (the patient’s) mouth sores in snow and washes his hand sores in the lake.’ (PT 1285, ll. 41-42, cf. Dotson 2008: 44, n. 16)

A translation ‘stain’ would also work, and perhaps take better account of the washing; such a translation also fits example (9).

(9) smye gtor-gyi sṅiṅ-po-la /
stain dispel-GEN heart-ALL

‘For the essence which dispels stains, “Om ajite (?) hūṃ phāṭ.”’ (IOL Tib J 149.2, folio 13 verso, l. 5, cf. Dalton and van Schaik 2006: 24)
Example (10) incontrovertibly confirms a meaning ‘stain’ or ‘defilement’.

(10) phu  
older.brother said
ruṅ myi ruṅ-la / appropriate neg appropriate-all
dogs-par ma byasna / heeding-TRM
srid-gyi dkrugs-mar ḥgyuro // governance-GEN agitated become
zas-la dog-par ma byasna // food-ALL heeding-TRM NEG do-CVB
dugīs srog yal-to poison-AGN life loose
chauṅ-ma-la dog-par ma byas-na // wife-ALL heeding-TRM NEG do-CVB
rogs gyuro // friend become
gtshaṅ smye-la dog-par ma byasna / clean stained-ALL heeding-TRM NEG do-CVB
myi ēnan-par skyeho // person bad-TRM born
graṅ dro-la dog-par ma byas-na // cold warm-ALL heeding-TRM NEG do-CVB
myi nad-du gyuro // person illness-TRM become

‘The older brother said: he who takes no heed for appropriate and inappropriate will be agitated in governance; he who takes no heed for food will loose his life by poison; he who takes no heed of wives will be a friend; he who takes no heed for clean and stained, (that) man takes vile rebirth; he who takes no heed of cold and warm, (that) man becomes ill.’ (Dialogue of two brothers, PT 1283, ll. 297–300)

It is tempting to tie smye with dme(h), a word which refers to a class of grievous polluting crimes including incest, fratricide, and “impurity between members of religious fraternities” (Dotson 2009: 95 note 183). Dotson translates the one clear occurrence of this word in the Old Tibetan Annals as ‘fratricide’.
bya.gagî. lo.la: bab.ste/
bird-GEN year-ALL fall-CVB
btsan.po. Ňen.kar.na. bźugs.śīn/
emperor Ňen.kar-LOC remain-CVB
blon. chen.po: Btsan.sña:dañ/
minister big Btsan.sña:-ASS
Mañ.ädchenstag.tsab: gñis/ dmeḥ: byuñ/
Mañ.nnenstag.tsab: two fratricide arise
Śaṃs:-GEN Sum.chu.bo-TRM minister big Btsan.sña: die

The meaning ‘fratricide’ is made in explicit in two passages related to laws governing hunting accidents.

// gñan-ba-dañ/ mdaḥs rṅul-phas/ phog-na/
relative-ASS arrow-AGN shoot-CVB strike-CVB
dnmer brtsti-ba-dañ myi
fratricide-TRM counting-ASS NEG
brtsti-bahi khrims-la/ /
counting-GEN law-ALL
záñ-lon chen-po man-cad/
minister big downward
dmañs mtthag-ma yan-cad/
masses common upward
ri-dags-la stsogs-pa-/la/ mdaḥs rṅulde/
animal-ALL etc.-ALL arrow-AGN shoot-CVB
phu nu-bo nañ/
older.brother younger.brother among
gcīg-gis gcīg bkum-na /
one-AGN one die-CVB
dnmer brtsti-ba-dañ myi brtsti-ba ni/
fratricide-TRM counting-ASS NEG counting TOP
thon-myīhi khrims-gyi nañ-na/
homicide-GEN law-GEN among-LOC
nu-bo nañ/ gcīg-gis bkumste/
younger.brother among one-AGN kill-CVB
dnmer brtsti-ba-dañ myi brtsti-bai/
fratricide-TRM counting-ASS NEG counting-GEN
khrims-kyi yi-ge bźin gcado/
law-GEN text according cut
‘The law as to whether or not to count it as fratricide when an arrow, shot (?), strikes a relative—From ministerial rank down to the common masses, when shooting (?) at game etc. with an arrow, if between an older and younger brother one is killed, as to whether or not to count it as fratricide, [it is decided according to] the law of homicide, when someone kills the younger brother it is decided according to the law which (decides) whether it is to be counted as fratricide or not.’ (PT 1071, recto, ll. 325-328, cf. Richardson 1998: 155)

law of homicide, when someone kills the older or younger brother it is decided according to the law which (decides) whether it is to be counted as fratricide or not.’ (PT 1072, 48-51)

One instance of dme in the Sum-pa Mother’s Sayings clearly does not mean ‘fratricide’, but rather a spiritual defect.

(14) lhas ma bźes-par lug bśas-pa ni /
god-AGN NEG eating-TRM sheep slaughtering TOP
dmer ḥgyur-ro //
stain-TRM become

‘A slaughtered lamb the god does not eat, it becomes a (ritual) stain.’ (Sum-pa Mother’s Sayings, IOL Tib J 730, ll. 24-25)

All of the phonological or orthographic variations between the two words have parallels in other lexemes. For variation among s-, r-, and d-, one can point to examples such as the class of gods Dmu, Rmu, Smu (cf. Coblin 1987), the word ‘knee’ pus-mo, dpus-mo, spu-smo (cf. Hill 2007: 488), or the clan name Dbaḥ, Rba, Sba which gave rise to the well-known eponymous historical text the Dbaḥ bźed, Rba bźed, Sba bźed (Diemberger and Wangdu 2000: x et passim). Zhang provides a number of examples of s- / d- variation including sbon, dbon ‘grandson’, sma, dmaḥ ‘low’, and skrum, dkrum ‘meat’ (2009: 176). In general Old Tibetan has my- before the front vowels -i- and -e- where classical Tibetan has simple m- (e.g. Classical Tibetan mi, Old Tibetan myi ‘person’, Classical Tibetan med, Old Tibetan myed ‘no exist’). There are however a limited number of words that have m- before front vowels in Old Tibetan. Temple points to dmeḥ as the only example in the corpus of texts which he studies where m- does not palatalize before a front vowel (2012: 28 et passim). Laufer had previously to men-tog ‘flower’ as another such example (1914: 99). Two other words also show a pronounced tendency to not palatalize, namely bud-med ‘woman’ and phra-men ‘gilt silver’ (cf. Takata 2006: 164, Dotson 2007: 8 note 7).6 Although the reasons why dmeḥ, men-tog,  

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6) In the Old Tibetan Documents Online (OTDO, http://otdo.aa.tufs.ac.jp, accessed 19 Nov. 2012) bud med occurs 35 times (PT 1047 x22, PT 1283 x5, PT 2204c x1, IOL Tib J 740 x7) against bud myed 18 times (PT 1047 x10, PT 1073 x1, PT 1287 x1, PT 1297.2 x1, IOL Tib J 730 x1, IOL Tib J 734 x4). Note that PT 1047 has both bud med (x22) and bud myed (x10). In OTDO phra men occurs 16 times (PT 1071 x13, PT 1072 x1, PT 1089 x2) and phra myen occurs once (PT 1071).
Jäschke (1880) gives the word ʁme-ba, with the variant spellings dme- ba and sme-ba, as having the three definitions ‘spot, speck, mark’, ‘detestable sin’, and ‘uncleanness of food’. Thus, the word, together with its variable spellings, is also known in later documents.

The words smye and dmeḥ appear to be in complementary distribution with smye in PT 1285, IOL Tib J 149.2, and PT 1283, but dmeḥ in IOL Tib J 750, PT 1071, PT 1072, and IOL Tib J 730. This distribution supports the identification of the two spellings and opens the possibility that this variation in spelling is a Merkmal, which together with other criteria, could serve to stratify manuscripts diachronically.

Because those sinologists who cite a word smye ‘fire’ in Old Tibetan cite no document or Tibetan lexicographical work in support of this form, it is not possible to trace with certainty how this ghost made its debut. However, a probably source is F. W. Thomas' treatment of Or. 15000/265.

The reading smye, marked by brackets, is insecure with rmye and sgye also offered as possible readings in a footnote. A supplementary note to this passage writes with more certainty “smye (mye) for me (mye) ‘fire’

Note that PT 1071 has both phra men (x13) and phra myen (x1).

(Thomas 1935-1963: vol iii, p. 104). Referring to this passage, smye ‘fire’ is included in the glossary with the laconic entry “smye = mye ‘fire’” (Thomas 1935-1963: vol. III, p. 166).

A digital image of the document under magnification appears instead to present the straightforward mye where Thomas reads smye (cf. Figure 1)

![Figure 1: The akṣara which Thomas reads smye](image)

This akṣara shows none of the horizontal shift in the alignment of the stack that one can witness in examples of sm- in the same document; it is overall quite similar to other examples of my- (cf. Figure 2).

![Figure 2: Other examples of sm- and my- in Or. 15000/265](image)

Also seeing my- rather than smy-, Takeuchi reads the akṣara as myi (1998: 119, #366). Nonetheless, the vowel diacritic in Table 1 is distinct from the ‘i’ seen in Table 2 (b and c) and ‘fire’ makes better sense in the passage than ‘person’ (myi) or ‘not’ (myi). In short, Thomas is correct to understand this word as ‘fire’, but the text does not read smye but simply mye. The inclusion of a word smye ‘fire’ in Thomas’ glossary is a mistake.
Mei (2012) invokes the sequence *sm- > x- in Old Chinese to account for 諧聲 xiéshēng contacts between words with Middle Chinese m- and words with Middle Chinese x- (e.g. 灭 mjiet < *mjiat ‘destroy’, 煬 xjwiet < *smjiat ‘extinguish, destroy’). Mei reconstructs 煬 xjwɨjX ‘burn’ as *smjədx, and pointing to purported Old Tibetan smye ‘fire’, regards the s- in Old Chinese as “confirmed by comparative evidence” (2012: 7). In fact smye ‘fire’ is a ghost word; the real word for fire in Old Tibetan, namely mye, provides no support for an s- prefix in Old Chinese. In contrast, Sagart and Baxter (2012) reconstruct such instances of x- with *m- (i.e. 灭 mjiet < *met ‘destroy’ and 煬 xjwiet < *met ‘extinguish, destroy’). Sagart (1999: 159) reconstructs 煬 xjwɨjX < *bhmɨjʔ, which in the current system of Baxter and Sagart would be *məjʔ; in their system *sm- exists, but develops into Middle Chinese s- rather than x- (Sagart and Baxter 2012). Discussions of the merits and demerits for *sm- as a solution for problems in Old Chinese phonology will doubtless continue apace, but an Old Tibetan word smye ‘fire’ need have no place in these discussions for the simple reason that such a word does not exist.

References


