Etymological Speculations on some Chin Words*

F. K. Lehman, University of Illinois

0. Below, I shall examine the etymologies of two Chin words. Of the two proposed etymological derivations, one has some possibly interesting consequences for the reconstruction of proto-Tibeto-Burman phonology. The other merely establishes a presumptive cognate and corrects a previously accepted misapprehension.

1. Let me take the trivial etymology first. Many specialists know that the word Chin as used for the T-B speaking peoples of the western Hills of Burma is supposed to be of purely Burmese derivation and to have no connection with any word these people use for or amongst themselves. Long ago, Professor Gordon H. Luce traced the word (written Burmese: khyaŋ:) back to early lithic inscriptions, where it was used in reference to presumptively savage people in and round about the middle Chindwin valley, next to the present Chin Hills, before it came to be occupied or ruled by the Burmans. Reasoning largely from the inscriptions themselves, he construed the word, in Old Burmese, something like 'comrade' or 'ally' and the like, viz., an especially recognised alien folk. In my (1963) book on the Chin, I accepted this derivation without any question. Subsequent work has led me to revise my views.

When I came to learn ŋ-men ('Southern') Chin, later on, I encountered the word khxaŋ¹. This word means 'a people' of this or that village, region, country or language. So, the people speaking this language are nᴵ-met khxaŋ, the Chin people in general are khxou khxaŋ, (where khxou us cognate with the better-known designation, zou), Americans are melikan khxaŋ and so forth.

With the letter x being just contextually devoiced γ, which is the reflex of *r, both in Southern Chin and, again, in the Northern dialects of Tiddim, khxaŋ seems to reconstruct, internally, as *khraŋ. This is not, of course, superficially identical with the Burmese spelling of the word in question, khyaŋ:, but, on the one hand, it is clear (Nishi 1977), that there has been a long history of confusion in the writing of Burmese between medial -y- and medial -r- and, on the other, reflexes in Chin of presumptively reconstructed initial clusters *khy- are notoriously hard to find (Benedict 1972: 51, for instance). Indeed,

there is apparent internal evidence within Chin that they may have fallen
together, in some cases, precisely with certain khr- clusters. For
instance, in the dialect of n-men recorded by Father Jordan (1969), that
of the Yawdwin, to the east of the one I worked with, khx- is ch- : the
word for 'people' is chaŋ. In this dialect, the reflex of the proto-
initial *c(h)- is also ch-, but to the west it is kh-. Nor is the word
I am examining the only one embodying these sound equivalences. For
example, n-men khxaŋ   or   chaŋ (Yawdwin) is the caŋ of Haka Chin
[ruŋ-rul]-caŋ-[cei], a collective term for creeping and flying things,
more specifically, insects, and cognate with Burmese (WB) khraŋ,
'mosquito.' This indicates perhaps that reconstructed T-B *khr- or
*khy- is khx- in n-men and a palatal affricate in Haka and related
Central Chin languages as in the Yawdwin dialect of n-men, itself.

Of course then, the khxaŋ or chaŋ of n-men, meaning 'people'
is a perfect cognate for Burmese khyaŋ, which is Spoken Modern Burmese
Chin. It follows, that we cannot after all be too confident in Luce's
proposed etymology. It makes more sense to suppose that the Burmese
were writing, in the inscriptions, about a people who called themselves
*chaŋ, 'people.' And even if Old Burmese had, as Luce asserts, a
cognate word having roughly the meaning he assigns it, of 'ally,'
it is surely a cognate of the Chin word, its specialized meaning
derived from the more generalized Chin one.

2. But this is a rather minor affair and I have introduced it not
only for its own sake but also because it allows me to raise additional
considerations.

In the first place, Benedict (1972: 38ff.) makes it clear, that
T-B *Cr- has Chin-Lushai reflexes of t- quite uniformly whilst *Cl-
is preserved as such, C- being any stop, aspirated or not. It must
therefore be, that both 'people' and 'insect' are to be reconstructed with
an initial *khy- cluster; clearly, at least on the whole, n-men khx-,
insofar as it goes back to true cluster initials of T-B, represents
*khy-, even though otherwise x represents *r and event though initial
*r- prefixed by k- also produces n-men khx-, as in khxuk, khxit, khxet.
These three are the numbers six, seven and eight, where it is perfectly
certain that the velar is a prefix and the numeral roots are reconstructed
in Kuki-Naga (Benedict 1972: 94-95, for six and eight) as *ruk and *rvat.
It is thus not 'people' but 'insect' that seems to have got misspelt in
Burmese, with medial -r- for medial -y-. Of true clusters, only *khy-
gives n-men khx- and cognate Central Chin č (Benedict 1972:45 shows
inaspirate *ky- gives Central Chin and Lushai s-).

2.1 In the second place, this has forced me to consider the n-men kh-
initials. We have seen that at least some n-men (Yawdwin) words with
palatal affricate initials are derived from ones with original *khy-
and *khr-, by palatalization. It is instructive to observe how this
series relates to what happens to T-B palatal initials, so-called, in
Chin languages, viz., *c(h)- and *ĉ(h)-. Benedict (1972: 53) shows that
*č- also gives c-, here. At the same page (footnote 178), he proves it
at least highly likely, that *ĵ- gives Lushai ch-, whilst elsewhere
(17, footnote 63) he points out that in general Lushai (and Haka Chin)
ch- comes from *t-.

However, c- of Lushai, for instance, has some cognates in n-men
with kh-, in the western dialect. Thus Lushai cem, 'knife,' is Yawdwin
n-men chim but western n-men khim. This has to go back to *č-, because
if it were from *khy-, it would be khx- in the latter dialect. At any
rate, we now have a basis for deriving some n-men kh- from T-B palatal
initials.[2]

Now, not all n-men kh- initials are derived from palatals. Many of
them come originally from *k- (in Benedict's reconstruction -- alternatively
*kh-, if his proto-sonant initials were in fact plain surds). For
example, we have khua, which as in other Chin languages means, variously,
'village', 'weather', and the like. It is nevertheless of interest, that
some n-men kh- words reconstruct with palatal proto-initials and hence
should have Burmese cognates, if any, with Written Burmese palatal
initials (conflating T-B true palatals and alveolar affricates),
Modern Spoken Burmese s(h)-.

3. This observation gives me a foundation for examining a n-men
verb that used to puzzle me very much. The verb 'to speak' in this
language is khiw, where the final segment represents a lightly articulated
voiced, bilabial fricative. It is a rare final in this language,
although in some Chin languages all syllable-final high glides and vowels
are realised as buzzing sounds of this kind. Jordan writes this word
as khi, but he is simply in error. What is the source of this final?

It is useful to start by looking at the initial, again. Obviously,
it might come from original *k(h)- or from some sort of palatal initial.
But no imaginable cognates turn up for it outside Kuki-Chin on this
assumption, whereas on the assumption of a palatal initial, it has an
obvious cognate in Burmese hsou (WB chui), 'to say' or 'to convey a meaning.'
After all, the Burmese aspirated palatals correspond in part to
Benedict's proto-T-B palatal surd č with or without (1972:22) aspirate-
type prefixes (h-č). That they can also go back to non-palatal alveolar
affricates is beside the point; we are looking for a possible cognate
relationship between n-men kh- and something with other than a *kh-
source. Such kh- in n-men correspond to Lushai c-, which in turn
corresponds to *č- but not *c-. But now it becomes necessary to look
further into the status of the vowel and final of khiw. This will
have consequences for the reconstruction of the proto-T-B vowel system.

3.1 Assume khiw is in fact cognate with Burmese hsou. Then -iw
has to be systematically related to Burmese -ou, WB -ui in Benedict's
transcription. Now Benedict vaccilates between taking this back to a
proto-T-B *-uu or a proto-T-B *-uw. That is, he reconstructs the source
as either a long vowel or an homorganic diphthong. But clearly this can
provide no support for the suggested etymology, because in general the
reflex, in Chin-Lushai, of *-uw (call it) is -u(u). Thus, Burmese (WB)
ʔərui 'bone' (*ru(s)), is Lushai ru?; WB (mi-)hkui, 'smoke' (*kuw)
is Lushai (mei-)khu, and so on (Benedict 1972:57-61).

However, the interpretation of '-ui' is far from transparent. The
vowel is in fact written in Burmese with a combination of the sign for
'-i' and that for '-u;' a combination one is in fact always taught to
read, from top to bottom, as '-iu.' Furthermore, in Shan and in the Mon

alphabet from which both the others are adapted, this sign combination
stands for a high back, unrounded (sometimes mid-back, unrounded) vowel
(ɯ, ə). Indeed, there is some evidence (from the Loloish branch of
T-B) taken by various scholars to favour reconstruction of 'ui' not
as *-uw but as *-ɯ or *-ʉ (see Nishida 1976).[3]

I take the view that, in Burmese at any rate, the proper reading of
this digraph is -iu. Inscriptional evidence bears this view out, since
there was frequently the practice to add after it a final -w. On
this view it is supposed that the digraph began as a sort of phonetic
transcription of a phonemic -ou, with a degree of dissimilatory
unrounding and fronting of the first element. Some speakers of Burmese
today do the same kind of thing. In turn, this suggests something more.

Suppose the vowel in khiw comes, as appears on face value, from a
hitherto unsuspected T-B *-iw. It would surely be likely to fall
together, in Burmese cognates, with reflexes of *-uw; its Burmese
pronunciation would be something rather like [-iu] or [-ʉu]. I
strongly suspect that this is the right analysis.

However, there is also a perfectly obvious Lushai cognate for
n-men khiw, namely, kheu?, 'to tell,' 'to admonish.' This suggests
two conclusions. First, that, if the Burmese correspondence is right,
the kh- initial, here, has to go back to T-B *h-č; for all other sources
that might produce Burmese hs- (WB hc-) are precluded. *c- gives
Lushai c- (see 'knife,' above) and *c(h)- is Lushai s-. There is no
Lushai palatal reflex for h-prefixed T-B palatals.

Second, it suggests that *-eu, which Benedict finds somewhat
problematical (1972:68) ought to be reconstructed to parallel *-iw.
In turn, this helps us choose between Benedict's alternative
reconstructions, *-uw, which he indeed prefers, and *-uu (his third
alternative, *-əw, 1972:57, seems, on the present view, a sort of
phonetically motivated compromise for transcribing the dissimilation
of the vowel from the final glide). Again, I suggest that this is
correct.

Finally, there is some independent reason to relate in some way
what Benedict reconstructs as *-oy and *-wiy reflexes in both Chin-
Lushai and Burmese. Not only do these fall together in Burmese
Cwei (C being any initial consonant), but in addition, in Chin languages,
the word for 'dog,' which reconstructs as *kwiy or *kuəy and is
hkwei in Burmese, is ?uy. That is, it follows the rule that initial ?
does not form clusters with medial glides. It definitely has its
syllabic peak on the vowel -u-.

It would, naturally, be elegant to be able to see Chin -iw and -eu as reflexes of the same T-B proto-final, and -uy and -oy, likewise. Such alternations as Lushai ŋoi, 'quiet,' and ŋui, 'downhearted,' (Benedict 1972:68), being obviously cognate, are suggestive of such a conclusion. Similarly, the n-men pair yoi, 'dual suffix,' and yui, 'plural suffix,' are suggestive. However, in view of the non-cognate minimal pairs in Lushai like cio, 'every,' and ceu, 'except,' we must settle for the weaker but unquestionably firmer conclusion that these finals have T-B sources of parallel vowel-plus-glide format. The same conclusion holds for *-oy and *-uy.

3.2 In short, I have to hypothesise that, whatever else it included, the proto-Tibeto-Burman vocalism has to be reconstructed with the following in it:

-i, -iy, -iw   -uy, -uw, -u

-e, -ey, -ew   -oy, (-ow), -o.

This constitutes a considerable simplification and systematisation of Benedict's table (1972:58).

Notes

*This paper was originally presented at the Tenth International Conference on Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics on the 15th of October, 1977 in Washington, D. C.

[1] I am omitting tonal marks on Chin and Lushai words, because tonal correspondences with the rest of Tibeto-Burman has yet to be worked out and seems to be irrelevant to the present demonstration. Burmese tones are given, because they are needed for looking up the words in standard works of reference.

[2] I am accepting, for simplicity of cross-reference to his work, Benedict's reconstruction of the basic distinction amongst initial consonants in proto-Tibeto-Burman as one between surd and sonant, with aspiration being just a case of prefixing. The arguments about initials, in the present paper, work, however, even if we suppose that the basic distinction was between plain surds and aspirates, with prefixing being additional sources of aspiration. In any case I herewith append a brief tabular presentation of some correspondences:

*č---Lushai <u>cem</u> knife   Yawdwin NMen <u>chim</u>   Western NMen (k)<u>š</u>im
*khr-   <u>caŋ</u> insect   NMen Kxr/ch   Burmese khr(W), <u>ch</u> (spoken)
                                              <u>khraŋ</u>/<u>chiN</u> mosquito

*čhr/chr--Lushai <u>zou</u>   Yawdwin NMen <u>chou</u>   Western NMen <u>kh(x)ou</u>,
                                   <u>chio</u>

where this ethnic self designation (Lehman 1963) is known to mean
marginal, rude, uncultivated, corresponding, then, to Burmese (W) <u>chou:</u>,
(Sp) <u>hsou:</u> (spoilt).
[3]In fact, it is, I think, appropriate to see in, say, the Akha
-<u>oe</u> reflexes of *TB -uw the result of, first, centralising of the first
element, dissimilation from the following glide, followed, in Loloish,
by simplification of the whole final, perhaps through de-rounding of
the glide itself.

References

Benedict, Paul K. 1972. Sino-Tibetan: A Conspectus. Cambridge University
    Press.
Jordan, Marc, M. E. P. 1969. Chin Dictionary and Grammar. Paris:
    Mimeographed.
Lehman, F. K. 1963. The Structure of Chin Society. Urbana: University of
    Illinois Press.
Nishi, Yoshio. 1977. Medials in Burmese. Journal of Kagoshima University,
    Department of Liberal Arts, Section of Historical Studies, Volume
    26:41-52.
Nishida, Tatsuo. 1976. Hsihsia, Tosu and Lolo-Burmese Languages. Studia
    Phonologica X: 1-15.