Notes on Chinese Etymology:
The past and present of \textit{kù} 古 ‘past’
and \textit{chūn} 今 ‘present’

William G. Boltz
University of Washington, Seattle

Words for abstractions like ‘truth’ and ‘beauty’, ‘old’ and ‘new’, because they do not always lend themselves to precise and explicit objective definition, are sometimes linked up with cognate (or presumed cognate) words of more concrete meaning in the hope that the latter will somehow help us to understand the exact sense of the former more precisely than we otherwise might. We hope, in other words, that the clearly focussed outline of the concrete might sharpen in our mind’s eye the blurry semantic edges of the abstract.

The meaning of the word ‘truth’ may seem straightforward enough, but what really is the precise sense, for example, of its lexical affines \textit{true}, \textit{truce}, \textit{trust}, or \textit{tryst} as ethical, social, or institutional terms? What is the ‘truth’ in a \textit{truce} between states, a \textit{tryst} between lovers, or the \textit{trust} of the bankers? Nineteenth century philologists recognized, correctly, that the word ‘true’ and its allied English forms, as well as its cognates in other Indo-European languages, were etymologically akin to the word ‘tree’. Both words are traceable to a common Indo-European root reconstructed as *\textit{deru} or *\textit{drew}.\footnote{Calvert Watkins, \textit{The American Heritage Dictionary of Indo-European-Roots}. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985, p. 12.}

If we ask how the etymological connection between \textit{true} and \textit{tree} helps us to understand the precise notion or concept of ‘truth’, we may answer in two ways. We may say that ‘truth’ is an abstraction of ‘tree’ in the literal sense of \textit{abstract}, i.e., \textit{drawn} or \textit{pulled out from}. That is, we may be inclined to claim that the abstract concept of ‘truth’ is somehow to be thought of as semantically \textit{derived} from a more primary, or basic, concrete meaning ‘tree’.

To the extent that this analysis identifies a meaning of ‘firmness, sturdiness, reliability’ as the semantic link, what we might call the \textit{semantic common denominator}, between \textit{trees} and \textit{truth} it is correct and useful. But to assume that the more abstract word ‘truth’ is semantically \textit{derived} from the more concrete word
‘tree’ is mistaken. The mistake is not a linguistic or etymological one; it is an intu-itive one. The key word is derived, the use of which suggests a hierarchical relation between the abstract and the concrete, mediated by a process, unspecified and in fact unspecifiable. There is no way that the word ‘tree’, because it is concrete and clear-cut, can be demonstrated to be in any meaningful sense more primary or more basic than the word ‘true’. In fact it is not even clear what the notions ‘primary’ and ‘basic’ mean in connection with semantic considerations like this. To assume that the abstraction arose out of the concrete, just because it may seem intuitively “natural”, is, notwithstanding the literal meaning of abstract < Lat. abs-trahō, to jump to an unfounded conclusion.

The second, and preferable, answer to the question of how establishing an etymological link between ‘tree’ and ‘true’ helps us to understand the meaning of the latter is to look upon that core meaning of ‘firmness, sturdiness, reliability’, what we referred to above as a common semantic denominator, as accounting equally and on a par for both the abstract and the concrete senses alike, without imposing any kind of derivational or conceptual hierarchy on the semantic relations of the specific words in question to each other. In other words, it is one thing to recognize a semantic common denominator that two or more cognate words may share as a set, and to use that recognition to elucidate the exact meaning of those words of the set that may be vague; it is quite another thing to speculate, or worse to assume, that the words with vague meanings are secondary semantic derivatives of those with concrete meanings.²

There is a practical value, as I hope to show with the following Chinese examples, in establishing a cognate relation between abstract and concrete words for the purpose of getting a clear picture of what those words mean and how they are used. But we must guard against the facile assumption that such cognate relations provide evidence for any kind of semantic hierarchy or evolution from concrete to abstract when that cannot be empirically demonstrated.


Consider first the word kù < *kúks 銅, clearly a hsieh-sheng derivative of kú/documents (compiled by Hsü Shen 許慎, ca. A.D. 100) defines this as 鑄塞 also ‘a kind of plug or stopper used in metal casting’, apparently a part of the technical vocabulary of early Chinese metallurgy, and a

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meaning that does not appear in any extant texts as far as I have been able to determine.\(^3\)

The character 鍮 does appear in pre-Han texts, twice in the Tso chuan, read (presumably) kù < *kd̂ks, but with a meaning different from the metallurgical one specified by the Shuo wen:

(a) Tso chuan, Ch'eng 成 2: 子反請以重幣鍮之.
   “Tzu-fan requested a sizable monetary inducement to block him [from further holding office].”

(b) Tso chuan, Hsiang 襄 21: 會於商任鍮樂氏.
   “They convened at Shang-jen [agreeing] to block Luan [Ying 盈 from serving at anyone’s court].”

In these two passages the word has a clear sense of ‘block, debar, keep in check’, a meaning that is seen in modern Chinese chin kù 禁鍮 ‘debar, block’. We can also see, I think, a semantic link between this meaning and the technical sense of Hsü Shen’s Shuo wen definition, both meanings being reducible to a core sense of BLOCK, in one case of the flow of molten metal, in the other of service in political office.

Now, consider this passage, from Chia Yi’s 賈誼 biography in the Han shu:

(c) Han-shu 48: 失今不治必為鍮疾.
   “If the flaws are not corrected right away they will inevitable become chronic afflictions.”

The meaning of kù 鍮 here seems almost to be the opposite of the sense it has in the two Tso chuan passages above; here it is something like ‘widespread, enduring, pervasive’ whereas in the earlier passages it was, as we said, ‘blocked, held in check’. The question we have to ask is whether these are two different words, both pronounced kù and written with the same character, or are they at bottom in some sense the same word, and only superficially appear to be almost opposites in these two usages.

Consider the following two passages from Mencius:

(d) Mencius 2B.1: 固國不以山谿險
   “It is not by recourse to precipitous terrain that one renders his state secure.”

(e) Mencius 2B.10: 不敢請耳固所願也.
   “I would not, of course, have dared to ask it, yet it is something I have persistently yearned for.”

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In the first of these two, the sense of 固 is ‘to fortify, make secure, make durable’. Given the context of “having recourse to mountains and valleys” to achieve this security, there is more than a slight hint that ‘security’ means being “blocked off” from easy approach or access (an assumption that Mencius is challenging here). In the second, the same character 固, still read 固, has a sense of ‘persistently’, or ‘insistently’, or ‘enduringly’.

These two senses of 固 in the Mencius passages seem to me to parallel the two senses of 固 in the Tso chuan passages, on the one hand meaning BLOCKED (OFF or UP), on the other meaning PERSISTENT, ENDURING. One last example will, I think, reconcile the two variant meanings, and show the underlying semantic common denominator:

(e) Mencius 6B.3: 固哉高叟之為詩.

“How obdurate is Old Kao’s regard for the Odes!”

The word 固 in this line is intended to suggest that Kao tzu is unable to look imaginatively or creatively on certain lines from the Shih ching, but is instead stuck in a rigid, mechanistic, and inflexible frame of mind, in a word, obdurate. Yet the word, and the line, also suggest that a part of his problem lies with his persistence, or insistence, in holding to certain fixed views. Rigidity and inflexibility imply persistence on insistence, just as firmness and fastness, of e.g., a state, imply (en)durability and a capacity to last a long time, even ‘chronic’ (as used in the Han shu passage above).

What all of these uses have in common is a sense of “hard and fast”, a sense that corresponds closely to the latin root dūr-, seen in dūrus ‘hard, rigid, fast’. This can be sketched as follows:

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4 This sense of 固 is closely related to the sense of 故 that the late A.C. Graham identified as the “appeal to precedent” in contrast to chih 智 ‘cleverness’ in his discussion of human nature in the Mencius. See his article “The Background of the Mencian Theory of Human Nature” in Studies in Philosophy and Philosophical Literature, Singapore: The Institute of East Asian Philosophies, 1986, pp. 7–66, esp. pp. 49–53. This is a revised version of the same article which appeared originally in the Ch’ing hua hsüeh pao, n.s. 6.1 & 2 (1967), pp. 215–271. In that original version Graham explained 故 as ‘sticking to things as they were’ (p. 251), a wording at once both more colloquial than his revised phrase ‘appeal to precedent’ and better reflective, I think, of the underlying sense OBDURATE than the revision. I am grateful to Dr. Reinhard Emmerich for suggesting to me the pertinence of Graham’s remarks about 故 to my notes on 固 古.
kù < *káks

obstructed, blocked < indurate, made fast

chronic < enduring, perduration

persistent < enduring, obduration

secure, fortified < durable, made fast

Beyond this set we can now see, I think, how the same root sense of dük applies to a number of additional members of the kù 古 hsiēh-sheng series, and in particular to kù 古 itself:

A. Akin to a sense of FIRM, FAST
   故 kù < *káks ‘reason, basis’ < ‘something relied on as firm, durable’
   估 hù < *gáʔ ‘reliable, rely on’ < ‘take as firm, fixed, durable’

B. FIRM > HARDENED > DESSICATED
   估 k’ü < *khāg ‘dessicated’
   胡 hú < *gág ‘dewlap’
   居 chü < *kág ‘dried meat’

C. HARDENED > HARDSHIP > HARSH
   苦 k’ü < *kháʔ ‘duress’, ‘suffer’

D. HARDENED > ENDURE
   姑 kù < *kág ‘tolerate, endure’ (> ‘suffer’)

NB: the meaning ‘for a while’, often associated with 姑 is only a peripheral sense of ‘endure’.

E. HARDENED > DURABLE > ENDURING
   故 固 kù < *káks ‘old, former, past’
   古 kù < *káʔ ‘past, antiquity’ < ‘what has endured’.5

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5 Professor E.G. Pulleyblank has recently discussed the etymological relation of kù 古 to other Chinese words for ‘old’, including in particular chíh 久 ‘to last a long time’, chíh 蕃 ‘to be old’, and kù 胡 ‘long-lived’. He has tried to account for the semantic relation between these various words in specific phonetic terms, according to his understanding of the Old Chinese reconstruction for each, a goal somewhat different from, but not entirely incompatible with, mine in the present article. Here I have limited myself to words written with graphs in the kù 古 hsiēh sheng series, simply as a way to keep the data from becoming more extensive than necessary to my intended ends.

The additional words that Pulleyblank introduces, chíh 久 and chíh 蕃, are both from the chíh 之 rime group, whereas words written with graphs having a 古 phonophoric are in the yù 魚 rime group. Pulleyblank accounts for this apparent phonetic discrepancy by showing it to have been in origin a difference simply between a head vowel -ʔ- (the chíh 之 rime group words) and a head vowel -a- (the yù 魚 rime group words) in Old Chinese, the latter the result, he proposes, of the -ʔ- form plus a nonsyllabic a affix. See E.G. Pulleyblank, “Ablaut and initial voicing in Old Chinese morphology: *a as an infix and prefix”, Proceedings on (sic)
Again, consider first one of the less common hsieh-sheng derivatives of chin 今, viz. chin 絆, occurring in the following passage from the “Nei tse”内則 section of the Li chi:

(a) Li chi, Nei tse, A: 絆綹綦履.

Legge translates:

“They will also fasten on their necklaces, and adjust their shoe-strings.”

Legge gives a footnote to the word 'necklaces', acknowledging that the meaning is not clear, and that the phrase chin ying 絆繒 is not well understood by the principal commentators. He translates the same word ying 繒 in the opening paragraph of this chapter, just a few lines prior to the passage in question here, as 'cap-string', a meaning that it has in several well known pre-Han texts. It is not clear why he does not allow this meaning here.

The word is sometimes explained not just as ‘cap-string’, but as the cap-fastening cord that hangs from each side of the cap and that goes under the chin and around the neck, a sense that can easily be seen to be related to the cognate word ying 繒 'necklace'. Allowing that ying 繒 means in this passage what it normally means in other classical texts, the meaning of the line ought to be something like: “(Bind) the cap-strings and lace the sandals.”

The question now is what is the precise meaning of the word chin 絆, which I have tentatively translated as ‘bind’ (in parentheses). The standard commentarial gloss is chièh 結 to tie, bind’, but this does not sufficiently indicate what it means to chin 絆 one’s cap-strings.

The character 絆 occurs in the first line of ode 091 of the Shih ching, 青青子衿, translated by Waley as “Oh, you with the blue collar”. The Han stone classics (漢石經) version of this line writes 結 for 絆. Both 結 and 絆 are given the same pronunciation in the Kuang yün 廣韻 entered in the ch’ìn 侵 rime with the chú

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居 initial, implying Middle Chinese kjóm, Old Chinese *kóm, homophonous with chín 今. It seems reasonable to suppose that the variation 締 / 緊 is graphic, not lexical, and that the former is simply an allograph of the latter.

The Shuo wen does not enter the character 緊, but has the character 締, defined as 交衽也 ‘to cross the lapels’. The Fang yén (compiled by Yang Hsiung 揚雄 [53 B.C. – A.D. 18]) does have the character 締, explained as chiào 交 ‘crossed’ or ‘to cross’ ( 締謂之交) , with a note by Kuo P’u 郭璞 (276–324) to the effect that it means the part of a garment that is crossed at the neck ( 衣交領也), hence Waley’s ‘collar’. Tai Chen’s 戴震 (1723–1777) exegesis of this line says that 締 and 緊 are orthographic variants, and adds 緊 as a further graphic variant of the same word. The Shih míng (compiled by Liu Hsi 劉熙, ca. A.D. 200) enters 緊 glossed paronomastically as 禁也 ‘to block, obstruct’, and explains the pun as 交於前, 所以禁禰風寒也 “crossed in front, a means to keep out wind and cold”. Clearly this definition and explanation accords with the sense of ‘crossed lapels’ that the Shuo wen gives for 緊.

The pertinence of all of this to the Li chì line with which we started is not in the Shih míng pun 緊禁也, but in the recognition that the word chín < *kóm, irrespective of how it is written (締, 緊, or 締), has a fundamental meaning of ‘to close by bringing two [more-or-less symmetrical] parts of a garment together from opposite sides’. This is what ‘crossed lapels’ means, and in connection with the cap-strings of the Li chì line I would suggest the same sense: to close (i.e., tie or knot) by bringing the two strings together [under the chin, presumably] from opposite sides.

From this meaning of ‘close a garment by bringing two opposing parts together’ we can extrapolate a basic sense of CLOSE TOGETHER ~ CLOSE IN ON ~ CLOSE DOWN ON. This meaning is fundamental to both of the graphic constituents of chín 今. The Shuo wen analyzes 今 as 從 从 締 “derived from 从 and from 貝”, and adds 貝 古文及 “ 貝 is the ancient form of the character 及”. The word chí < *gòp 及 is phonetically the ju sheng ‘entering tone’ counterpart of *kóm, with a voiced initial, and the meaning is ‘reach up to, come close to’ (either spatially or temporally), i.e., CLOSE IN ON. The top component of今, viz. 从, is the obsolete form of 合, the latter consisting obviously of the original 从 augmented by 非 underneath. The word hó < *gòp written either 从 or 合, is

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8 Shuo wen chieh tsu ku lin, p. 3693
9 Fang yén shu cheng 方言疏證, Su-pu pei-yao ed. 4/4b.
10 ibid.
11 Shih míng 釋名, Su-pu ts'ung-k' an ed. 5/1a.
12 Shuo wen chieh tsu ku lin p. 2224.
nothing other than the type A syllable counterpart to the type B syllable chí < *gâp 及.\textsuperscript{13} The word hó has the general meaning of ‘close’, often ‘close down on’ (cf. hó 盒 ‘box’ < ‘closed by a lid’), and is in a certain general sense semantically representative of the whole word family.

Note how this sense of CLOSE IN ON or CLOSE DOWN ON accounts for the following words:

1. 含 hán < *gâm ‘hold in the mouth’ < ‘close the mouth down on’;
2. 嘴 chin < *gâm? ‘shut the mouth’;
3. 嘴 ch’iên < *glâm? ‘hold in the mouth’;
4. 衛 hsién < *grâm ‘snaffle’ < ‘held in the mouth’;
5. 甘 kân < *kâm (‘sweet’) < ‘mouth holding something’
   (the Shuo wen analyzes it as 從口合—“derived from ‘the mouth holding something’”, the implication being ‘holding something desirable or tasty’, therefore ‘sweet’);\textsuperscript{14}
6. 捏 ch’iên < *gâm ‘pinch’ < ‘close in on from opposite sides’.

\textsuperscript{13} The terms ‘type A’ and ‘type B’ are taken from the description of Old Chinese set out by E.G. Pulleyblank, as are all Old Chinese reconstructions (marked with asterisks) in this paper. Type B syllables are those that correspond to Middle Chinese third division words (san teng 三等 of the rime tables), and type A syllables are all of the rest. In other formulation of the same distinction we can say that Pulleyblank’s type B syllables correspond to Karklāren’s syllables with medial yod, [-j-]. See item (v) below, pp. 167–168 et passim.

For Pulleyblank’s Old and Early Middle Chinese reconstructions see:


\textsuperscript{14} Shuo wen chieh tzu ku lin, p. 2026. Literally, of course, the analysis says “derived from the mouth holding ‘the one’”. Hsü Shen identifies ‘the one’ as ‘the Tao’ (一道 also), but this is probably a reflection of his immediate intellectual milieu, and is unlikely to be applicable in any significant way etymologically. Serruys notes that “[g]raphically is a simple chih shih application where it must refer to anything that might be contained, ‘held in the mouth’”. Paul L-M. Serruys, “On the System of the Pu Shou (部首) in the Shuo wen chieh tzu (説文解字)”. Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica (Taipei), vol. IV, pt. iv (1984), p. 688.
7. 𢰤 hán < *góm ‘to envelope’ < ‘close in or down on from opposite sides’.

The etymological sense of chǐn 金 ‘metal, ore’ now becomes apparent. The Shuo wen describes the graph as 象金在土中形 , 今 聲 “depicting metal ore located in the ground, the graph 今 is the phonophoric element (i.e., the ‘phonetic’ or ‘sound-bearing’ element)”\(^\text{15}\) We can re-phrase this as ‘metal ore held in, or enveloped by, the earth’, and see that this word clearly also belongs to the HELD IN or CLOSED IN ON sense of the word family.

In conclusion I would like to suggest that the etymological understanding more sinico of the word chǐn < *kóm 今 ‘now, present moment’ must be something like “that moment in time enveloped from one direction by the past and from the other by the future, that is to say, the moment HELD IN or CLOSED IN, we might say ENCAPSULATED, ENCOMPASSED, or EMBRACED by the “bookends” of the past and the future.

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\(^{15}\) Shuo wen chieh tsu ku lin, p. 6241.