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Research Note



Etymological Notes on Early Chinese Aristocratic Titles

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Recent studies of the canonical Five Ranks (*wudeng* 五等, known from *Mencius* 5B.2 and related texts) by Li Feng and Yuri Pines¹ contain many useful observations, but neither one discusses the etymologies. Most of the titles can be shown to originate in kinship terms and reflect the early Chinese conception of political power as supervening on lineage status.² Traditional Sinology, both in East Asia and in the West, has unjustifiably contented itself with examining usage and graphic variation, without considering etymology, which is possible only by considering the forms in Old Chinese. Etymology being an inexact science, the ideas offered below are necessarily tentative, but I hope they will help us overcome the fusty renderings “duke, marquis, earl, viscount, and baron,” which vary from occasionally defensible (marquis) to wholly preposterous (viscount).

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- 1 Li Feng, “Transmitting Antiquity: The Origin and Paradigmatization of the ‘Five Ranks,’” in *Perceptions of Antiquity in Chinese Civilization*, ed. Dieter Kuhn and Helga Stahl (Heidelberg: Edition Forum, 2008), 103–34; Yuri Pines, “Names and Titles in Eastern Zhou Texts,” *T'oung Pao* 106 (2020): 714–20.
 - 2 Cf. Li Feng, *Landscape and Power in Early China: The Crisis and Fall of the Western Zhou, 1045–771BC* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006), 294–99; He Ziquan 何茲全, *Zhongguo gudai shehui* 中國古代社會 (Beijing: Beijing shifan daxue chubanshe, 2001), 95–96; and Cho-yun Hsu and Katheryn M. Linduff, *Western Chou Civilization* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1988), 163–71.

To begin with *gong* 公 (*C.q^oŋ),³ the highest of the Five Ranks: the etymon must be “senior lineage male.” *Weng* 翁 (*q^oŋ-s), “father, grandfather, father-in-law, respectful term for an old man,” is obviously cognate.⁴ *Fangyan* 方言 even records that *weng* was regionally attested for *gong* in the sense of “senior, old.”⁵ This explains passages where *gong* is closer to “patriarch” than “duke” or “lord.”⁶ For example, the various personages known as Mao *gong* 毛公 in archaic texts and bronze inscriptions (e.g., Ban *gui* 班簋 and Mao *gong ding* 毛公鼎)⁷ are best understood as patriarchs of the Mao lineage, whose members were related to the royal house of Zhou, and were treated with respect by Western Zhou kings.⁸ Since patriarchs of prominent lineages were also commonly lords of estates, the senses of “patriarch” and “lord” do overlap, and the name Mao could also denote Mao *gong*’s territory.⁹ But “Duke of Mao” is not an advisable translation of Mao *gong*, as the relatively small settlement of Mao was not a duchy in any plausible sense. (“Duke of Zhou” for Zhou *gong* 周公 makes even less sense.) The etymon “patriarch” also explains the common practice, recognized even in antiquity,¹⁰ of applying the title *gong* to a deceased lord, regardless of

3 Old Chinese reconstructions follow the system in William H. Baxter and Laurent Sagart, *Old Chinese: A New Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2014).

4 Cf. Ulrich Unger, *Hao-ku* 63 (1999): 3. Unger also cites *zhong* 妯 (*t-qŋ), “husband’s elder brother,” as does Laurent Sagart, *The Roots of Old Chinese* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1999), 97. The *Hao-ku* series remains unpublished, and I am grateful to Wolfgang Behr for showing me this item. I am indebted to two anonymous referees for other helpful references.

5 Qian Yi 錢繹 (1770–1855), *Fangyan jianshu* 方言箋疏 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1991), 6.246.

6 Robert H. Gassmann, *Verwandschaft und Gesellschaft im alten China: Begriffe, Strukturen und Prozesse* (Bern: Peter Lang Verlag, 2006), translates *gong* as “Patriarch” throughout; for his reconstruction of “Die patriarchale Sippe,” see 226–34.

7 *Yin Zhou jinwen jicheng* 殷周金文集成, ed. Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo 中國社會科學院考古研究所 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984–94), nos. 4341 and 2841, respectively.

8 The Mao lineage is listed among descendants of King Wen 文王 in Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhu* 春秋左傳注 (Second ed., Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1990), vol. 1, 421 (Xi 僖 24). Presumably the reference is to King Wen’s son Mao *shu* Zheng 毛叔鄭, who is called Mao *gong* in Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛 (1893–1980) and Liu Qiyu 劉起鈞, *Shang-shu jiaoshi yilun* 尚書校釋譯論 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2005), vol. 4, 1712 (“Guming” 顧命). See also Edward L. Shaughnessy, *Before Confucius: Studies in the Creation of the Confucian Classics* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1997), 71–72.

9 Cf. Zheng Qiao 鄭樵 (1104–1162), *Tongzhi ershi lue* 通志二十略, ed. Wang Shumin 王樹民 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1995), vol. 1, 79 (“Yi yi wei shi” 以邑爲氏).

10 E.g., Zhong Wenzheng 鍾文丞 (1818–1877), *Chunqiu Guliang jingzhuan buzhu* 春秋穀梁經傳補注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1996), 4.129 (Huan 桓 18): “When [a lord] is buried, he is called *gong*; he is raised to the highest [rank]” 葬稱公，舉上也。

his rank. Many of the “patriarchs” invoked in bronze inscriptions were, in fact, deceased ancestors.

The derived sense of “the general good” (as opposed to *si* 私, “private interest”) appeared only in the Eastern Zhou; it bespeaks the new and despotic notion that whatever pertains to the lord of a polity pertains to that polity and its population generally.¹¹ (*L'état c'est le gong.*) Thus the phrase *gongtian* 公田, which is presented as “public fields, fields worked communally, etc.” in the Confucian fantasy in *Mencius* 3A.3,¹² would have referred originally to *the lord's* fields, i.e. the fields that peasants were required to till in addition to whatever their family possessed. Hence the line in Mao 212 (“Datian” 大田): “May it rain on our lord's fields, and then reach our own” 雨我公田，遂及我私。

The second of the Five Ranks, *hou* 侯 (*[g]ʰ(r)o) is nearly homophonous with the title *hou* 后 (*gʰ(r)oʔ),¹³ which usually means “queen” or “dowager,” but can also be borne by males (as in *houji* 后稷, Lord Millet, i.e. Qi 棄, the mythic progenitor of the Zhou people). Some scholars doubt that the two are cognate.¹⁴ Regardless, both the word *hou* and its graph (侯, with an embedded arrow 矢)¹⁵ disclose connections with archery. For example, *hou* 鏃 (*[g]ʰ(r)o or *[g]ʰ(r)o-s) refers to a feathered arrow with a metal head,¹⁶ and *hou* 侯 itself can mean “target” (as in *shehou* 射侯, “to shoot at the target,” in Mao 106 [“Yijie” 猗嗟]).¹⁷ The word evidently reflects the cultural conception of a lord as a practiced and self-possessed marksman, and Peter A. Boodberg proposed the translation “archer

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- 11 See the references in Paul R. Goldin, *After Confucius: Studies in Early Chinese Philosophy* (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 185, n. 6.
- 12 The critique in Wan Guoding 萬國鼎 (1897–1963), *Zhongguo tianzhi shi* 中國田制史 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2011), 88–97, is still valid.
- 13 Cf. Mei Tsu-lin, “Some Examples of Prenasals and *s- Nasals in Sino-Tibetan,” in *Linguistics of the Sino-Tibetan Area: The State of the Art: Papers Presented to Paul K. Benedict for His 71st Birthday*, ed. Graham Thurgood et al. (Canberra: Department of Linguistics, Australian National Univ., 1985), 335. Like Mei, Zhang Shuya et al., “A Study of Cognates between Gyalrong Languages and Old Chinese,” *Journal of Language Relationship [sic]* 17.1 (2019): 79, associate *hou* 后 with the Tibeto-Burman word for “head” (e.g., Tibetan *go-pa*, “headman”).
- 14 Thus, Axel Schuessler, *ABC Etymological Dictionary of Old Chinese* (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 280.
- 15 For representative palaeographical forms, see *Guwenzi gulin* 古文字詁林 (Shanghai: Shanghai jiaoyu chubanshe, 1999–2004), vol. 5, 479–84.
- 16 Hao Yixing 郝懿行 (1757–1825), *Erya yishu* 爾雅義疏, ed. Wang Qihe 王其和 et al. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2017), B.6.525 (“Shiqi” 釋器).
- 17 See also the oft-quoted definition of *hou* 侯 in Jiang Renjie 蔣人傑, *Shuowen jiezi jizhu* 說文解字集注, ed. Liu Rui 劉銳 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1996), 5B.1081–82: “the target at which one shoots during the spring sacrifice” 春饗所射侯也。

lord.”¹⁸ It is one of the oldest titles, abundantly attested in oracle-bone inscriptions.¹⁹ Significantly, it is not a kinship term, and this may be why it was not applied to nobles and administrators in the Zhou court.²⁰ A Zhou-dynasty *hou* was entrusted with regions on the periphery, and thus the traditional rendering “marquis” is not absurd. My only question is why, if Sinological practice favors the English title “earl” for *bo* 伯 (and not the French equivalent, “count”), we use the French title “marquis” for *hou* (and not the English equivalent, “marquess”).

Bo (*p^hrak) is indeed a kinship term: “eldest brother, father’s elder brother, elder lineage male.” It contrasts with *shu* 叔 (*s-tiwk), “father’s younger brother, husband’s younger brother, etc.” Pines criticizes translators for mechanically rendering Zhi *bo* 知/智伯 as “Earl of Zhi,” and I have been guilty of this very lapse in judgment.²¹ (Now I would say “Elder of Zhi.”)²² Moreover, in phrases like *Xibo* 西伯 (an epithet of King Wen 文王), *bo* is best understood as “overlord” or the like, since it is cognate with *ba* 霸 (*p^hrak-s), “hegemon.”²³ (Evidently the eldest brother was expected to be the protector.) Or when the sage Yu 禹 is called *bo*,²⁴ the title probably should be translated as “protector” (or maybe “ealdorman”) rather than “earl.”

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- 18 *Selected Works of Peter A. Boodberg*, ed. Alvin P. Cohen (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1979), 217. (He also suggested the unwieldy neologism “scoparch.”) Cf. Li Feng, *Bureaucracy and the State in Early China: Governing the Western Zhou* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008), 44, n. 4; Susanne Adamski, *Die Darstellung des Bogenschießens in Bronzeinschriften der West-Zhōu-Zeit (1045–771 v. Chr.): Eine philologische Quellenanalyse* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2017), 24–25, seems unconvinced.
- 19 See David N. Keightley, *Working for His Majesty: Research Notes on Labor Mobilization in Late Shang China (ca. 1200–1045 B.C.), as Seen in the Oracle-Bone Inscriptions, with Particular Attention to Handicraft Industries, Agriculture, Warfare, Hunting, Construction, and the Shang’s Legacies* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, Univ. of California, Berkeley, 2012), 309–10; and Edward L. Shaughnessy, “Extra-Lineage Cult in the Shang Dynasty: A Surrejoinder,” *Early China* 11–12 (1985–87): 186–87.
- 20 Cf. Li Feng, “Transmitting Antiquity,” 112.
- 21 Paul R. Goldin and Elisa Levi Sabattini, trans., *Lu Jia’s New Discourses: A Political Manifesto from the Early Han Dynasty* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 29.
- 22 Pines, “Names and Titles in Eastern Zhou Texts,” 714, recommends “Zhi the Elder,” but this is confusing, because it would imply that his son was “Zhi the Younger” (as Seneca the Elder was the father of Seneca the Younger).
- 23 Cf. Schuessler, *ABC Etymological Dictionary of Old Chinese*, 169–70.
- 24 Most famously in *Shangshu jiaoshi yilun*, vol. 1, 192 (“Yaodian” 堯典), but the phrase *bo* Yu 伯禹 is not rare. Note that the pseudo-Kong Anguo 孔安國 commentary, followed by other scholiasts, interprets this *bo* as an abbreviation for Chong *bo* 崇伯, “Lord of Chong,” the title of Yu’s father, Gun 鯀; that is to say, Yu has succeeded his father (*Shangshu jiaoshi yilun*, vol. 1, 205, n. 12).

The title *zi* 子 (*tsəʔ) must derive from its straightforward sense of “child, son,”²⁵ and is borne by royal princes in oracle-bone inscriptions (hence also *taizi* 太子, “crown prince”—never “heir apparent”),²⁶ but as the fourth of the Five Ranks, it is not commensurate with princely status. Thus I suspect that it refers in such contexts not to royal sons, but to *noble* sons²⁷—in other words, something close to *junzi* 君子, lit. “son of a lord,” or someone whose own nobility derives from that of his father (before the term was stripped of aristocratic pretense and assigned purely moral criteria).²⁸

Axel Schuessler has suggested that *cai* 才/財/材 (*[dz]ʰə), “talent, wealth, timber,” is cognate with *zi*.²⁹ The phrase *caizi* 才子 (*[dz]ʰə- tsəʔ), “talented son(s),” should, in any case, be regarded as a euphonious reduplicative (*diezi* 疊字), throwing new light on passages such as Wen 文 18 in *Zuozhuan* 左傳, which relates the “talented descendants” (*caizi*) and “untalented descendants” (*bu* 不 *caizi*) of various legendary clans.³⁰ But I am not aware of any evidence that the title *zi* itself was understood as *caizi*, “talented lord,” as attractive as that would be.

The etymology of the lowest of the Five Ranks, *nan* 男 (*nʰ[ə]m), “male,” is unknown.³¹ Perhaps it is related to *ren* 任 (*n[ə]m-s), “to bear a load, to be placed in charge.”

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- 25 The problem with Boodberg’s “thane” (*Selected Writings of Peter A. Boodberg*, 215) is that, although it is related to Greek *teknon*, “child,” in Old English usage “thane” (*þegn*) always referred to the king’s “servitor, follower, warrior,” never the king’s “child, son.”
- 26 An heir apparent is someone whose right to succeed is indefeasible and hence cannot be abrogated even by the sovereign. See, e.g., Charles Sweet (1849–1906), *A Dictionary of English Law* (London: Henry Sweet, 1882), 400. The title belongs to a system of divine-right primogeniture like that of monarchic England, not traditional China, where the sovereign almost always retained the right to choose (and oust) his heir. Thus “crown prince” is preferable.
- 27 Gassmann, *Verwandtschaft und Gesellschaft im alten China*, 343 *et passim*, uses “Junker.”
- 28 On this process, see Yuri Pines, “Confucius’ Elitism: The Concepts of *junzi* and *xiaoren* Revisited,” in *A Concise Companion to Confucius*, ed. Paul R. Goldin (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2017), esp. 165–72; Robert H. Gassmann, “Die Bezeichnung *jun-zi*: Ansätze zur Chunqiu-zeitlichen Kontextualisierung und zur Bedeutungsbestimmung in *Lun Yu*,” in *Zurück zur Freude: Studien zur chinesischen Literatur und Lebenswelt und ihrer Rezeption in Ost und West: Festschrift für Wolfgang Kubin*, ed. Marc Hermann and Christian Schwermann (Sankt Augustin: Institut Monumenta Serica, 2007), 411–36; and Cho-yun Hsu, *Ancient China in Transition: An Analysis of Social Mobility, 722–222 B.C.* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1965), 158–74.
- 29 Schuessler, *ABC Etymological Dictionary of Old Chinese*, 175.
- 30 *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhu*, vol. 2, 636–42. This happens to be the oldest extant source of the name Taotie 饕餮, which has been misleadingly applied to the theriomorphic décor on Shang and Zhou bronzes.
- 31 It is perfectly homophonous with *nan* 南 (*nʰ[ə]m), “south,” but there is no self-evident connection.

Finally, some thoughts on the basic word for “lord”: *jun* 君 (*C.qur). The graph itself invites comparison with *yin* 尹, “custodian, governor, overseer,”³² but the Old Chinese reconstruction of *yin* is unclear. William H. Baxter and Laurent Sagart propose *m-qur? for *yin* because they believe it is cognate,³³ but Schuessler objects that the rhymes do not agree.³⁴ I would look to *qun* 群/羣 (*[g]ur), “flock, aggregation,” and possibly also *jun* 軍 (*[k]wər < *C.qur), “army.”³⁵ When *Xunzi* 荀子 tells us that a *jun* 君 is so called because he “is able to make [the people] flock together” 能羣也,³⁶ an idea repeated in later texts,³⁷ perhaps that is *not* another Confucian fantasy.

- 32 See the archaic forms and discussion in *Guwenzi gulin*, vol. 2, 29–34. Cf. Chen Yingjie 陳英傑, “Jinwen zhong ‘jun’ zi zhi yi yi jiqi xiangguan wenti tanxi” 金文中“君”字之意義及其相關問題探析, *Zhongguo wenzi* 中國文字 33 (2007): 140–41; and Mei, “Some Examples of Prenasals and *s- Nasals in Sino-Tibetan,” 335. Li Xueqin 李學勤, *Dangdai xuezhe zixuan wenku: Li Xueqin juan* 當代學者自選文庫：李學勤卷 (Hefei: Anhui jiaoyu chubanshe, 1998), 672, argues that *yin* could be used in place of a noble title in bronze inscriptions, but I suspect that, in such instances, the graph 尹 merely stands for 君.
- 33 Baxter and Sagart, *Old Chinese: A New Reconstruction*, 82.
- 34 Schuessler, *ABC Etymological Dictionary of Old Chinese*, 328.
- 35 On the diphthongization of *-ur to *-wər, see Baxter and Sagart, 255. Though they have been pure homophones since Middle Chinese, the connection between *jun* 軍 and *jun* 君 is uncertain. Nathan W. Hill, *The Historical Phonology of Tibetan, Burmese, and Chinese* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2019), 38, 207–8, and 241, associates *jun* 軍 and *jun* 郡 with ostensibly unrelated Tibetan words.
- 36 Wang Xianqian 王先謙 (1842–1917), *Xunzi jijie* 荀子集解 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1988), 8.12.237 (“Jundao” 君道). In *Xunzi jijie* 5.9.164 (“Wangzhi” 王制), the capacity of *neng qun* 能羣 is the reason why humans dominate all other species, a suggestion that all people are, to some extent, *jun*.
- 37 After *Xunzi*, *jun* and the derivative “commandery” *jun* 郡 (*[g]ur-s) were repeatedly glossed with *qun* 群/羣: see, e.g., a fragment from *Fengsu tongyi* 風俗通義 in Wang Liqi 王利器, *Fengsu tongyi jiaozhu* 風俗通義校注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), 492; Chen Li 陳立 (1809–1869), *Baihu tong shuzheng* 白虎通疏證 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1994), 8.376 (“Sangang liuji” 三綱六紀); and Wang Xianqian, *Shiming shuzheng bu* 釋名疏證補 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008), 2.7.59 (“Shi zhonguo” 釋州國).