

New Exploration on the Etymology of Xishuangbanna's

Ancient Name “车里” (chē lǐ)

วันที่รับบทความ: 14 ส.ค. 66

Wenxue Yang¹

วันที่แก้ไขบทความ: 23 พ.ย. 66

Changyan Shi²

วันที่ตอบรับ: 30 พ.ย. 66

Chunyan Yang³

Abstract

The etymology and meaning of the term “车里” (chē lǐ) have long been a subject of debate among scholars. Mr. He Ping proposes a new interpretation of its origin and meaning from the perspectives of philology and phonetics. However, the author of this paper holds different views, and deems that Mr. He Ping's conclusion lacks a solid foundation, so this paper discusses about it from a linguistic perspective. Since Panya Zhen's establishment of the Jinglong Jindian Kingdom in 1180, the administrative divisions of Xishuangbanna during successive dynasties have been centered around Jinghong. As a result, “景陇”, “彻里”, “车里”, and “景洪”, might be potentially different transliterations of the Dai language term “Chiang Rong,” all meaning “City of Dawn.” Hence, a more compelling argument can be made that “车里” and “彻里” originate from place names rather than being derived from the name of a pagoda.

Keywords: “车里” (chē lǐ), Origin, New Exploration, Discussion, Xishuangbanna

¹ Professor in the Faculty of Humanity, Chiang Rai Rajabhat University

² Associate Professor in the School of Foreign Languages, Yuxi Normal University, Yunnan, China.

³ Ph.D. Candidate in the Faculty of Humanity and Social Sciences, Lampang Rajabhat University.

Introduction

“车里”(chē lǐ) is one of the ancient names of Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan Province, China. Chinese scholars have previously conducted various investigations and interpretations regarding its origin. Mr. He Ping has challenged the prevailing arguments, claiming inadequate evidence for their credibility. He further investigates the origin of “车里”(chē lǐ) and concludes it to be a transliteration of the Dai-Tai language term for “佛塔”(fó tǎ), which means “stupa” or “Buddhist pagoda.” This new perspective was published in the academic journal *Thinking* in the first issue of 2003 with an article titled *New Exploration on the Etymology of Xishuangbanna's Ancient Name “车里”(chē lǐ)* (He, 2003). Nevertheless, the author of this paper believes that Mr. He's conclusion requires further verification and hence raises doubts, leading to a scholarly discussion.

Mr. He's Reviews on the Etymology of Xishuangbanna's Ancient Name “车里”(chē lǐ)

In the paper, Mr. He asserts that “车里”(chē lǐ) is a transliteration of “stupa” or “Buddhist pagoda” in the Dai-Tai languages “佛塔”(fó tǎ), mainly based on analyses and comparisons with linguistic properties of Thai language. He refers to his experiences in the paper and recalls the memories of traveling to Thailand, “In the year 2000, during my time as a visiting scholar in Thailand, I had an experience in Chiang Mai that led me to a new idea. That is, I visited a famous pagoda there, named Chedi Luang. According to the explanation in the Thai language, ‘Chedi’ means pagoda, and the *Thai Historical and Cultural Dictionary* defines it as the most revered architectural structure by Thai Buddhists... there is also a section in it concerning

about pagodas.” Besides, ‘Luang’ means ‘large’ in Thai language. Therefore, ‘Chedi Luang’ is translated into ‘Great Pagoda’.

New Exploration of the Etymology of Xishuangbanna’s Ancient Name “车里” (chē lǐ) from a Linguistic Perspective

Pogoda in the Thai language is “Chedi” which is “Zedi” in the Burmese language. The term is explained as “signifies a Buddhist pagoda or stupa” in the *Burmese Historical and Cultural Dictionary* in Burmese. Both the Thai and Burmese vocabulary for pagoda derive from the Pali language.

What caught Mr. He’s concern is that, during conversations with local people, he noticed that the term “Chedi” is often pronounced as “Cheli” by the locals in Thailand, where the consonant sound /d/ is pronounced as /l/.

Furthermore, upon closer observation, Mr. He discovered that the phenomenon of pronouncing the consonant sound /d/ as /l/ is quite common in the Dai and Thai languages. For example, Thai people typically pronounce the greeting phrase “สวัสดี” (Sawadi) as “สวลี” (Sawali) when greeting each other, that is, transforming the /d/ sound into /l/.

Similarly, the pronunciation of many place names follows a similar pattern. The well-known international airport in Bangkok is named “Dun Muang Airport.” However, tourist manuals or maps in Chinese is often written as “廊曼” (láng màn) Airport according to the local pronunciation. That is, the consonant /d/ in “Dun” is pronounced as /l/. Coincidentally, Udon Thani, a province in northeastern Thailand near Laos, is frequently translated as “乌隆府” (wū lóng fǔ) in Chinese publications in Thailand, adapting the pronunciation of “Udon” and converting the consonant sound /d/ to /l/. Another example is the Thai place name “Na Dei” which is transliterated as “那哩”

(nà lǐ), also involving the transformation of the consonant sound /d/ into /l/.

Additionally, the titles of ancient Dai and Thai ethnic leaders from ancient Xishuangbanna of China, Thailand, Laos, and other regions often include a designation written in Latin transcription as “Chao Phaen Din.” However, in translations, particularly from spoken Dai and Thai, it is often rendered as “召片领” (zhào piàn lǐng), meaning “Lord of the Vast Land,” with the consonant sound /d/ transformed into /l/.

In the Jingdong region of Myanmar, there is a group of “Being-assimilated Dai” Lawa people whose belief is Buddhism. They are referred to by the local Shan people (the Burmese Dai ethnic group) as “Tai Doi”, meaning “Dai people from the mountain.” However, their pronunciation for “Tai Doi” is often “Tai Loi”. Consequently, in Chinese translations of literature regarding this term, translators often render it as “傣雷” (dǎi léi). Besides, in the study of the Thai scholar Wenchui. Xishawa, it is also said, “The Lawa people in Jingdong region who follow Buddhism are referred to as ‘Dai Lei’ (Thai people on the mountain),” converting the consonant sound /d/ in “Doi” into /l/ based on the local pronunciation.

Therefore, Based on Mr. He’s points of views, within the Dai and Thai ethnic groups, the term for a Buddhist pagoda, “Chedi”, is often pronounced as “Cheli” in the spoken language, which is phonetically similar to “车里” (chē lǐ) in Chinese.

From above mentioned, Mr. He concludes that during the Yuan Dynasty, when people from the interior regions arrived in Xishuangbanna and inquired about the name of the place, there happened to be a nearby pagoda. The local residents, misunderstanding the question, interpreted it as asking about the object they were pointing to and responded with “车里” (chē lǐ). As a

result, the listeners, following the pronunciation, transcribed it as “车里”(chē lǐ), “彻里”(chè lǐ), or “车厘”(chē lí).

However, the author in the current paper contends that, from a linguistic perspective, Mr. He's conclusion is unconvincing. The reasons are as follows.

Firstly, a comparison between the phonological systems of Thai and Chinese reveals a significant difference between the two languages. That is, the Thai language has the voiced consonant sound /d/, whereas the same sound does exist in Chinese. The linguistic differences between the two languages help explain the reason why “Dun Muang Airport” might have its ‘Dun’ consonant sound pronounced as /l/, and why “Udon Tani” gets translated as “乌隆”(wū lóng), why “Na Dei” is transliterated as “那哩”(nà lǐ), and why “Chao Phaen Din” is translated as “召片领”(zhào piàn lǐng), while “Tai Doi” becomes “傣雷”(dǎi léi), and so on. In these cases, the absence of the voiced consonant sound /d/ in Chinese necessitates the use of a similar consonant sound /l/ for translation.

Additionally, Mr. He noticed during his conversations with locals in Thailand that they pronounced “Chedi” as “Cheli.” Upon further observation, he found that the substitution of the consonant /d/ with /l/ is quite common in the Dai and Thai languages. For example, Thai people often pronounce the greeting phrase “Sawadi” as “Sawali.” In fact, within the Dai and Thai ethnic groups, there is no confusion between the consonant sounds /d/ and /l/ during pronunciation. On the contrary, it is the non-native ethnic groups that lack the voiced consonant sound /d/ that tend to substitute /d/ with /l/, mistaking the voiced consonant sound /d/ for /l/.

Mr. He deems that during the Yuan Dynasty, when people from the interior regions arrived in Xishuangbanna and asked the locals about the place, there happened to be a nearby pagoda. The local residents, misunderstanding the question, interpreted it as

asking about the object they were pointing to and responded with “车里”(chē lǐ). Consequently, the listeners transcribed it as “车里”(chē lǐ), “彻里”(chè lǐ), or “车厘”(chē lí). However, the author considers that this explanation is questionable, which is similar to the explanation of the origin of the name “Magao” in Macau, where the origin is supported by historical evidence, while the association of “车里”(chē lǐ) in Xishuangbanna with a pagoda appears to be Mr. He’s personal conjecture, thus appearing somewhat far-fetched.

Taking a step back, if such an event did occur, the local people wouldn’t have referred a pagoda to “Cheli.” In the Dai oral language, the term for a pagoda is pronounced as “that,” while “Cheli” originates from Pali, often used in Buddhist scriptures or written language. Readers might wonder if the pronunciation of the term for a pagoda has changed from “Cheli” in the Yuan Dynasty to “that” in modern times among the Dai people. The author considered this question as well. Upon consulting relevant information, it was found that “that” is a Lanna (Northern Thai) word meaning “bone.” Nowadays, the Northern Thai dialect still uses “that” to refer to a pagoda, while “Chedi” is associated with the Bangkok dialect. Historically, the ancient Lanna Kingdom had a special relationship with Jinglong Jindian Kingdom, and their language and script were almost identical (Ma, 1993). Therefore, it is improbable that there would have been a linguistic exchange concerning pagoda terminology without using the local dialect but adopting the Bangkok dialect. In other words, the pronunciation would not be “Chedi,” but rather “that.” Unless the locals encountered by the people from the Yuan Dynasty were not actually Dai people. It is worth noting that both the Lanna people and the Dai Le people use the term “Chedi,” but it seems to be limited to written language, not commonly used in spoken language.

Having refuted the notion that “车里” (chē lǐ) or “彻里” (chè lǐ) is a phonetic transliteration for a pagoda, the question remains: what does “车里” (chē lǐ) or “彻里” (chè lǐ) refer to, and what is its true origin?

Looking at the entire history of Xishuangbanna, during the Western Han Dynasty, it was known as “Ailao Land.” In the Eastern Han Dynasty, it was part of the Yongchang Prefecture. During the Tang Dynasty under the Nanzhao Kingdom, it was called “Mang Nai Dao” and was under the jurisdiction of the Yinsheng Jiedudi. During the Song Dynasty, under the rule of the Dali Kingdom, it was named “Meng Le,” and in 1180, after the unification by Panya Zhen, it became the Jinglong Jindian Kingdom. In the year 1296, during the Yuan Dynasty, it was established as the central location of the Cheli Military and Civilian General Administration (Song, 1981; You, 1983). During the Ming Dynasty, it was renamed “Che Li Xuan Wei Shi” (Che Li Pacification Commissioner's Office). In 1570, the Pacification Commissioner Zhang Lan Meng began to establish Xishuangbanna, with four “banna” (administrative divisions) under its jurisdiction, within today's Jinghong City. In 1913, it was under the jurisdiction of the Pu Si Frontier Administrative General Bureau. In September 1929, a county seat was established, with Che Li County to the south, and the division of Pu Wen County and Liu Shun County to the north. In February 1950, after liberation of the country, it continued to be called Che Li County. On January 23, 1953, the Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture was established, restoring the administrative division of “banna.” In June 1958, Jinghong County was established (Dai, 2004).

Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, it can be seen from this, it's evident that since Panya Zhen's establishment of the Jinglong Jindian Kingdom in 1180, with the capital at Jinglong (referred to as Che Li's entire territory in the *"Le Shi" Chronicles*, with its main city called Jinglong, which means "City of Dawn" in Dai), successive dynasties' administrative divisions in Xishuangbanna have been centered around Jinghong. Therefore, "景陇" (jǐng lǒng), "彻里" (chè lǐ), "车里" (chē lǐ), and "景洪" (jǐng hóng), are likely different transliterations of the Dai language term "Chiang Rong," all meaning "City of Dawn." Hence, "车里" (chē lǐ) and "彻里" (chè lǐ) originate from place names rather than being derived from the name of a pagoda.

Upon the views mentioned above, recommendations regarding the verification of place names are provided. Firstly, it is necessary to consider multiple dimensions, including history, literature, linguistics and so forth. Secondly, from a linguistic perspective, one is recommended to take into account the historical development of language, including phonetics, semantics, and writing systems. Thirdly, it is essential not only to consider the language and writing system of the main ethnic group but also to take into account the languages and writing systems of surrounding cohabiting ethnic groups. Only by doing so can one "trace the origins through sound."

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