

The Tangut imperial title¹

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Abstract: The Imperial title 𐰇𐰏𐰍 𐰇wər¹ dzjwɨ¹ in Tangut is one of the rare Tangut words attested in both Tangut texts and Chinese sources. Using data drawn from Tangut texts and modern Qiangic languages closely related to Tangut, we propose an etymology for both syllables of this compound. The first syllable 𐰇 𐰇wər¹ means 'heaven', but its original meaning was 'the blue one'. The second one, 𐰏 dzjwɨ¹ 'lord', is a deverbal noun related to a verb root meaning 'to judge, to discriminate'. This article not only explains the etymological origin of an important Tangut title, it also illustrates how comparative linguistics should be applied to faithfully reconstruct Tangut morphological alternations.

Keywords: Tangut, deverbal noun, tonal alternation, Rgyalrong

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The title of the Tangut Emperor, 𐰇𐰺𐰍 𐰇wər¹ dzjwi¹, is one of the rare Tangut words attested in Chinese historical texts, variously transcribed as 兀卒, 烏珠 or 吾祖. It could translate Chinese 皇帝 *huangdi* ‘Emperor’ in texts such as the *Forest of Categories* or the *Newly Gathered Notes on Maternal Love and Filial Piety*. The aim of this paper is to discuss the etymology of this important title, using Tangut texts and comparative data from Qiangic languages. Modern Qiangic languages used in this paper include Japhug Rgyalrong (spoken in Rnga-ba district, Sichuan, see Jacques 2008) and Pumi (spoken in pockets in northern Yunnan and southwestern Sichuan).

The first element of this compound, 𐰇 𐰇wər¹, is one of the words can be used to translate Chinese 天 *tian* ‘sky’, for instance in the expression 𐰇𐰺𐰍 𐰇wər¹ khju¹ ‘(The world) under the sky’. It is a noun, not an adjective, as the normal word order in Tangut is Noun-Adjective, even in compounds translated from Chinese². However, as Nie Hongyin (2000:122-3) pointed out, it is clearly related to the adjective 𐰇 𐰇wər¹ ‘blue’ (Chinese 青 *qing*), a cognate of Japhug Rgyalrong *arɲi* ‘blue’ (Jacques 2008:429) and probably Tibetan *sngo*. The adjective ‘blue’ commonly appears with ‘sky’ in all those languages (Chinese 青天 *qingtian*, Tibetan *dgung sngon*³ or *gnam sngon po* and also Japhug Rgyalrong *tumu kɣɲi*, the abode of the Gods in traditional stories). The metonymical extension ‘blue’ → ‘sky’ is therefore quite straightforward. 𐰇𐰺𐰍 𐰇wər¹ dzjwi¹ can be translated as ‘heavenly lord’.

The second element, 𐰇 dzjwi¹ is not restricted to translating Chinese 帝 *di* ‘emperor’. For instance, in the *Forest of Categories* 3.3A, it is used to designate the dukes 公 *gong*⁴ of the Spring and Autumn period. Up to now, nobody has proposed an etymology for this word.

However, 𐰇 dzjwi¹ is not isolated in the lexicon of the Tangut language. The hypothesis proposed in the present paper is that it is derived from the verb 𐰇 dzjwi² ‘to judge’. This verb occurs as an entry in the monolingual dictionary *Wenhai*, where it is defined in the following way:

(1)	𐰇	𐰇	𐰇	𐰇	𐰇	𐰇
	1474	1183	5836	3708	4592	4480
	.jir	da.	khwu.	phja	phjo	kar
	2_77	2_56	2_51	1_20	2.44	2.73
	diligent	affair		cut		discriminate

To judge affairs and discriminate (right or wrong)

In all Tangut texts at my disposal, 𐰇 dzjwi² only appears in the compound 𐰇𐰺𐰍 dzjwi² dzjij², never alone. This compound is a transitive verb that can be used with 𐰇

² For instance, the name ‘Red Brows’ 赤眉 *chimei* is translated into Tangut as 𐰇𐰺𐰍 *bee² njij¹*, with a reverted word order conform to Tangut syntax (Jacques 2007:55).

³ This expression appears in a bonpo ritual text studied by Samten G. Karmay, where it refers to the place of origin of a god: kye sngon gyi bskal pavi dang po la / **dgung sngon** mthon povi yar steng na / rgyal povi sku gcig bszhugs pa la / “In times past, above in the blue sky, there was a king.” (Karmay 1991:349; 372). There is maybe a play on words here between *sngon* ‘In former times’ and *sngon* ‘blue’.

⁴ The story in question is about the life of the famous statesman 晉文公 Jin Wen gong.

𪛗 .jir² da² ‘affair’ as an object. See for instance the following example from the *Forest of Categories*, 4.17B:

(2)	𪛗	𪛗	𪛗	𪛗	𪛗	𪛗	𪛗	𪛗
	3955	1227	866	4686	289	3266	5113	4861
	thē	ɕjiw	ɣu	khjwā	.we	dzju	.wji	zjo.
	2. 13	2. 40	1.04	1.26	2.07	2.03	1.10	2.64
	Deng	You ⁵	Wu	district	city	master	become	when
	𪛗	𪛗	𪛗	𪛗	𪛗	𪛗	𪛗	𪛗
	1474	1183	5043	760	1225	1677	5414	2047
	.jir	da.	dzjwi	dzjij	.wjuu	lji.	rejr	mjii
	2.77	2.56	2. 28	2.37	1. 07	2.60	2.66	1.14
	diligent	affairs	judge	judge	mercy	benevolence	many	bestow

As Deng You was the governor of Wu district, he judged affairs in a very benevolent way.

We also find the nominalized form of this compound 𪛗𪛗𪛗 dzjwi² dzjij² mjijr² with the suffix 𪛗 mjijr² (Leilin, 4.27B.4) meaning ‘judge (in charge of recording the crimes of convicts)’, corresponding to Chinese 決曹吏 Juecaoli. If the noun 𪛗 dzjwi¹ is indeed related to 𪛗 dzjwi² meaning ‘to judge, to discriminate, to decide’, its original meaning should have been likewise ‘the judge’ or the ‘the one who decides’, an apt description for a ruler.

Is this derivation phonologically possible? Gong (1988[2002:63-65]) pointed out long ago that tonal alternations in Tangut were involved in noun/verb derivations. One finds both tone 1 verbs corresponding to tone 2 nouns and tone 1 nouns corresponding to tone 2 verbs:

	Noun	Meaning		Verb	Meaning
𪛗	dzeej 1.37	horseman	𪛗	dzeej 2.34	to ride
𪛗	khji 1.11	dagger	𪛗	khji 2.10	to cut
𪛗	.jar 1.82	daughter -in-law	𪛗	.jar 2.74	to marry (for a woman)
𪛗	zu 1.01	belt	𪛗	zu 2.01	to tie up
𪛗	wə 1.63	shoulder	𪛗	wə 2.56	to carry on shoulder
𪛗	dzji 2.10	food	𪛗	dzji 1.10	to eat
𪛗	tji 2.60	place	𪛗	tji 1.67	to put
𪛗	sju 2.03	wardrobe	𪛗	sju 1.03	to cover

Table 1: Tonal alternations in Tangut.

For many of these examples, we have no way to decide whether it is the noun which is derived from the verb or vice-versa. However, in a few case, thanks to comparison with other Sino-Tibetan, languages, it is possible to determine the direction of the derivation with certainty.

⁵ The Chinese 攸 you is incorrectly transcribed as 𪛗 ɕjiw², probably due to confusion with the similar-looking character 收 shou. In the *Notes on Filial Piety*, this name is correctly transcribed (Jacques 2007:30).

First, among the pairs tone 1 noun / tone 2 verb, we find two examples which have clear cognates in Japhug Rgyalrong, allowing us to reconstruct the actual alternation.

Tangut	meaning	Japhug	meaning
𐰇𐰺 wā 1.63	shoulder	-rpaʁ	id.
𐰇𐰺 wā 2.56	to carry on shoulder	mɣ-rpaʁ	id.
𐰇𐰺 .jar 1.82	daughter-in-law	-rʒaβ	wife
𐰇𐰺 .jar 2.74	to marry (for a woman)	mɣ-rʒaβ	id.

Table 2: Tone 1 → Tone 2 derivation

In Japhug, a language which preserves old presyllables unlike Tangut, the two verbs in this table are derived from the nouns by addition of the prefix *mɣ-*. The striking parallelism between the two pairs of examples in Tangut and Japhug strongly suggests that the direction of derivation is the same in Tangut. We can even venture that the tonal alternation is probably a trace of the loss of an ancient prefix cognate to Japhug *mɣ-* in proto-Tangut⁶.

The *mɣ-* prefix is found in five denominal verbs (Jacques 2008:67). The noun corresponds either to the instrument (to carry on shoulder), the place (to be in the middle) or the attribute (to become a wife).

-rpaʁ	shoulder	mɣ-rpaʁ	to carry on shoulder
-rʒaβ	wife	mɣ-rʒaβ	to marry (woman)
-ɣcɣl	middle	mɣ-rcɣl	to be in the middle
-ku	head	mɣ-ku	to be first
pɣrthɣβ	space in between	mɣ-pɣrthɣβ	to be in the middle

Table 3: The prefix *mɣ-* in Japhug

In denominal tone 1 → tone 2 derivations, the noun does not correspond to a fully potent agent in the resulting verb. The verb ‘to marry’ could seem to be a counterexample. However, in Japhug, although *mɣrʒaβ* does have two arguments, it is not really a transitive verb for two reasons. First, the woman being married is not marked with the ergative. Second, in nominalized construction, the man she is married to is constructed with the oblique nominalizer prefix *sɣ-*, not the patient nominalizer *kɣ-* :

- (3) ndzi-sɣ-mɣrʒaβ ra mu-pjɣ-pe
 3DU-NMLZ:OBL-marry PL NEG-PSTIMPF-good

The one to whom (her sisters) had been married were not good (Kunbzang, 117)

This shows that the *mɣ-* prefix does not derive denominal verbs of the type ‘to act as’, where the original nouns correspond to the agent of a transitive verb. In Tangut, it is more difficult to ascertain whether 𐰇𐰺 .jar 2.74 is transitive or not, as transitivity in this language is less strictly encoded in the morphology than in Rgyalrong languages.

Second, the verb 𐰇𐰺 dzej 2.34 ‘to ride’ has clear correspondences in Qiangic and

⁶ Several types of vowel alternations in Tangut have been explained as the trace of older affixes, reconstructed like here on the basis of Qiangic comparison. See in particular Gong 1999 and Jacques 2009.

Lolo-Burmese languages (see Matisoff 2003:188), for instance Pumi *dzěj* (Perfective *nə-dzěj*)⁷. The verbal root is widespread in those languages, but no noun corresponding to 𐰇 dzeej 1.37 'horseman, rider' is attested in any language but Tangut as far as we know. Therefore, 𐰇 dzeej 1.37 must be a Tangut innovation, a deverbal noun derived from the verb 𐰇 dzeej 2.34 'to ride'. Here we exactly have the opposite situation of the preceding case: a tone 1 noun derived from a tone 2 verb. The deverbal noun is clearly an *agent noun* 'the rider'.

On the basis of these data, two hypotheses can be proposed. First, 𐰇 dzjwi¹ 'lord' could be the original root, and the verb 𐰇 dzjwi² 'to judge' a denominal verb. Second, 𐰇 dzjwi¹ 'emperor, lord' could be a deverbal *agent noun* from the verb 𐰇 dzjwi² 'to judge'. The second hypothesis is more probable, because the semantic relationship between noun and verb corresponds better to the deverbal tone 2 → tone 1 derivation ('to ride' → 'the one who rides') rather than to the examples of denominal tone 1 → tone 2 derivation ('daughter-in-law' → 'to become (someone's) daughter-in-law').

Therefore, we can conclude that 𐰇 dzjwi¹ originally meant 'the judge, the one who decides, the one who discriminates', before acquiring its special meaning 'lord, emperor'. The verb 𐰇 dzjwi² 'to judge' preserved its original meaning, though compounding with a close synonym to form the bisyllabic verb 𐰇 𐰇 dzjwi² dzjij².

Tangut has a very opaque morphology. Ancient prefixes and suffixes have disappeared due to phonological attrition, leaving only vowel, consonant and tonal alternations behind. Most of these alternations were not productive anymore in Tangut, and it is only through comparison with modern Qiangic languages, especially the Rgyalrong languages, that we can make sense out of them.

The present analysis of the Tangut title 𐰇 𐰇 ŋwər¹ dzjwi¹ illustrates how future research in Tangut historical phonology and morphology should be done, and how Qiangic historical linguistics can contribute to the study of the Tangut empire.

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⁷ Dialect of Mudiqing 木底箐, Yongning 永寧, Ninglang 寧蒗 county, Yunnan (fieldwork by the author).

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