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CHINESE ORIGIN OF THE TERM *PAGODA*: LIANG SICHENG'S PROPOSED ETYMOLOGY¹

David Robbins Tien and Gerald Cohen

ABSTRACT

Western reference works regard the architectural term pagoda as being of uncertain origin, but an overlooked etymology proposed by Liang Sicheng convincingly solves the mystery: The word is Chinese, with the literal meaning “eight” (pa) “cornered” (ko) “tower” (t’a). Liang Sicheng, who pioneered the serious study of classical Chinese architecture, pointed out:

‘The octagonal pagoda, which first appeared in the Tomb Pagoda of Ching-tsang in 746, was the first “pa-go-da” in the real sense of the term.’

This 746 date is of course centuries before the first appearance of *pagoda* in a European language, viz. 1516 in Portuguese, so the chronology presents no problems.

¹(ed., G. Cohen): This article was developed as a *Comments on Etymology* working paper (Tien 2014, 2015), followed by several attempts to have it published formally in scholarly journals. Tien and I are grateful for the helpful feedback from the reviewers, which resulted in clarifications in the present version, but in the absence of an acceptance by the scholarly journals I suggested to Tien

In a speculative vein D. R. Tien adds that a specific pagoda constructed later (between 1597 and 1600) probably played an important role in helping the term to become entrenched in English and other European languages: the Pazhouta, standing in the Pearl River Estuary.

Also, besides the architectural term *pagoda* in China, there are similar sounding words used elsewhere (*pa-god, pagotha, pagoda*, etc.) pertaining to pagan deities or idols – very possibly homonymous with the Chinese architectural word but not its source.

* * *

Of the various English words with an origin in the Chinese language, the word *pagoda* has been surprisingly overlooked. Indeed, some have gone so far to assert that ‘no such word is known in the [non-Western] native languages’ (*NQ* 1852: 415).

that his work be shared with the general scholarly public via this present issue of *Comments on Etymology* (I will do my best to publicize it). Although *Comments on Etymology* is a series of working papers, I regard the present item as a formal publication.

The bottom line here is that the Chinese etymology of *pagoda* is both entirely plausible and yet unknown in Western linguistic scholarship. I expect, or at least hope, that Tien’s work will be welcomed, and I must emphasize that credit for the article’s Chinese content goes solely to him. My own contribution is limited to providing bibliographic and organizational input.

Tien’s professional title is Clinical Associate Professor of Ophthalmology at Brown Medical School, and he also chairs the International Affairs Committee for the American Association for Pediatric Ophthalmology and Strabismus. He frequently visits China on medical-related work. He studied at Peking University from 1978-1979 as one of the first group of Americans admitted before diplomatic relations were restored between the US and China.

As for my own background, I studied Slavic Linguistics at Oxford University and Columbia University (Ph.D., 1971) and since then have devoted my research efforts to etymology.

The modern word *pagoda* almost certainly comes from Chinese. The word *pagode*, which apparently refers to an architectural structure, first appears in a European language, Portuguese, in 1516, contemporaneous with the first contacts between Portuguese seafarers and China. The spelling *pagoda*, in the modern sense of a multitiered tower of East Asian origin, first appears in Spanish and received wide exposure throughout literate Europe at the end of the sixteenth century, after the publication and translation of Mendoza's *History of the Kingdom of China* in 1588, which was largely sourced from Spanish and Portuguese missionary reports from China.

Present etymologies for *pagoda* are unconvincing, with Persian, Sanskrit, or Tamil usually advanced as the likely source. Besides tending to be convoluted and forced, these suggested etymologies face the problem that architecture with the form of the pagoda did not exist in those areas where any of the above languages were spoken. The uncertainty voiced by *OED3* in its *pagoda* entry is therefore well justified:

‘The native form imitated by the Portuguese *pagode* is disputed: whatever it was, the Portuguese appears to have been a very imperfect echo of it.’

Further confusion arises from the mixing-up of the terms *pa-god*, *pagotha*, *pagode*, etc., (*pagão* is Portuguese for pagan) which are archaic European words for sculptures of pagan deities or idols sometimes found in temples with the architectural structure known today as the pagoda. The earliest attestations of ‘pagode’, are ambiguous as to whether they are referring to a general place for the activity of making offerings to pagan idols, or an actual building. It seems likely that there are two etymologies of ‘pagoda’, the first probably of mixed European/South Asian origin and referring to pagan idols or god-images or the activity of making offerings to the same, and the second one, of Chinese origin, referring to the architectural structure and the modern sense of ‘pagoda’. The third sense of ‘pagoda’, that is a gold or silver coin used in India, clearly is connected to the sense of ‘pagode’ or payments to gods. It is late in the 16th century, with the appearance of the spelling

‘pagoda’, and after prolonged European contact with China, that *pagoda* clearly begins to be used in the modern sense (Yule & Burnell 1968).

In weighing current etymologies of English words of Asian origin, we should be mindful of potential Anglo-Indian bias given that the Indian subcontinent was formally a British colony for centuries and many English etymologists, not surprisingly, were India-centric. The suggestion of a Chinese origin for ‘pagoda,’ is overlooked in *OED3* and evidently all other standard dictionaries. But at least one early sinologist, Herbert Giles, proposed a Chinese etymology (Poh-Ku-T’a, 白骨塔, “tower of the white bones”) in his 1878 ‘Glossary of Reference on Subjects Connected with the Far East’; and F. Hirth endorsed it in his 1882 ‘Loan Words from Chinese’ (written in German). It is striking that the common and modern meaning of *pagoda* immediately conjures up China rather than India, except in standard etymologies.

The likelihood of a Chinese origin for the word *pagoda* was also raised by the 20th century scholar of classical Chinese architecture, Liang Sicheng (1901-1972), although he differed from Giles’ and Hirth’s interpretation. In his 1984 book *Pictorial History of Chinese Architecture*, Liang wrote (p. 140):

‘The octagonal pagoda, which first appeared in the Tomb Pagoda of Ching-tsang in 746, was the first “pa-go-da” in the real sense of the term. *The origin of this peculiar word has always been a mystery* [emphasis added]. Perhaps the most plausible explanation is that it is simply the southern [Chinese] pronunciation of the three characters *pa chiao t’a* [八角塔, characters added by D.R. Tien] ----*pa-ko-ta* meaning “eight cornered pagoda”.

‘The word *pagoda* instead of *t’a* is deliberately used in this book because it is accepted in all the European languages as the name for such a monument. The very fact that the word finds its way into almost every European dictionary as the name for the Chinese *t’a* may reflect the popularity of the octagonal plan at the opening of Western contact.’

As a native speaker of Chinese, who was also fluent in English, Mr. Liang clearly had no difficulty finding a plausible etymology for the word *pagoda* from a transliteration of Chinese. Thus, eight-sided (in

Chinese numerology the number eight is auspicious) ‘Pa-Ko-Tas’ existed centuries before the appearance of the first Portuguese mariner, Jorge Alvares, in Canton in 1513, and were widespread and almost the standard design of pagodas by the time of sustained Western contact with China. It is also possible that the term had been transmitted to India along with other Asian regions even earlier by non-Europeans.

The structure of the Chinese language makes it easy for someone unfamiliar with Chinese to conclude that *pagoda* is not a Chinese word. Some linguists with a superficial knowledge of Chinese classify Chinese as a monosyllabic language because each written ideograph or character represents a single syllable. Therefore, since *pagoda* is a *three*-syllable word, how could it be Chinese? In fact, many Chinese words are composed of combinations of characters and, therefore, syllables. For example, the word *Beijing* (北京), literally, ‘northern capital’ or *feijichang* (飞机场), the word for airport, demonstrate this. (*Feijichang* is composed of three characters, three syllables: *fei* for flying, *ji* for machine, and *chang* for field.) The Chinese character for ‘pagoda’ is 塔, *Ta* (pinyin*), *Da* (Wade-Gilles**), and first appeared in Chinese in the first century C.E., concurrent with the introduction of Buddhism to China (Ge Hong: *Zi Yuan* [字原])

All Chinese pagodas have their proper names ending either in *da* (Wade-Gilles), *ta* (pinyin), 塔, Chinese), or *si* (寺, *si* being the Chinese word for temple.) For example, two of the most famous pagodas in China are the ‘Dayenda’ (大雁塔, Chinese; known in English as the ‘Great Goose Pagoda,’ located in Xian) and the ‘Tianningsida’ (天宁寺塔, Chinese; known in English as the ‘Heavenly Calm Pagoda’, in Beijing.)

Pagodas began to appear throughout China beginning in the sixth century C.E. The pagoda form developed indigenously in China and later spread to Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, and from these to other Asian countries. Though originally built in connection with Buddhism, later pagodas often lacked specific religious purposes and were built as navigational aides, watchtowers, or simply as *fengshui* monuments. As noted above, the eight-sided pagoda form [*Ba-Jiao-Ta* (Mandar-in), *Ba-Got-Tap* (Cantonese)] was widespread throughout China during the

period of early modern Western contact, thereby cementing and epitomizing the pagoda as the stereotypical Chinese building in the Western mind. The 'Porcelain Pagoda' in Nanking is such an eight-sided pagoda encountered by early Western visitors, and was widely discussed and pictured in engravings published in Europe in the early seventeenth century (Conner, 1979: Chapter 2)

While the nearly homonymous Chinese term for 'pagoda' pre-dates its construction by centuries, the modern meaning of *pagoda* likely became firmly entrenched in English and other European languages coincidentally, through the name of a specific pagoda standing in the Pearl River Estuary. Displaying the now standard eight-sided pagoda form, the 'Pa-Zhou-Ta' (Pazhouta, pronounced 'pa-joe-ta') Pagoda was built between 1597 and 1600, towards the end of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 C.E.), during the reign of Emperor Wanli [Guangzhou International (Internet website): English.gz.gov.cn. See entry on ancient pagoda.]

The Pazhouta, which still stands today, is an octagonal pagoda of nine stories standing over 150 feet high. An important navigational landmark in the age of sail, it is sited on a knoll near the banks of the Pearl River on Whampoa (now called Huangpu) Island, located in the Pearl River Estuary approximately ten miles south of the old city of Canton (now known as Guangzhou). The waters adjacent to Whampoa Island were the nearest to Canton navigable by large sailing ships, and thus the area became known as the Whampoa Anchorage, as ocean-going ships visiting Canton from the sixteenth through late nineteenth century would be forced to anchor there.

From the Whampoa Anchorage the Pazhouta Pagoda was easily visible to European travelers, and was the first pagoda most would see. For centuries after its construction, it was the most conspicuous man-made structure on Whampoa, and its distinctively Chinese building design increased its exotic appeal. It is variously referred to in the English literature as the 'Nine Stage' or 'Nine-story Pagoda', the 'Whampoa Pagoda, or the 'Half-way Pagoda' (Elliot 1833, Crossman 1991: 138) owing to its location on the riverine route up from the sea to Canton. To the Chinese it was always called 'Pazhouta', one of the

traditional 'eight beautiful scenes' (Sargent and Palmer 2002) of Canton during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911 C.E). Its name was derived from its location on one of two hills that resembled the shape of a 'pipa', or Chinese lute. The Pazhouta Pagoda was likely built, at least in part, for *fengshui*, as well as a navigational aid for the burgeoning "maritime silk road", something suggested strongly by the motif of a European figure carved into the stone base of the pagoda. The Pazhouta Pagoda is depicted in countless China Trade paintings, porcelain pieces, and various *objets d'art* brought back to the West by China Trade merchants beginning in the seventeenth century. This wide exposure made the Pazhouta Pagoda likely the pagoda most familiar to Westerners.

Sir William Chambers (1723-1796), a major figure in English architecture and design, spent two extended sojourns in Canton in 1740 and 1749 and was the man most responsible for the chinoiserie craze that swept Europe in the mid-18th century. In his 1757 book, based on drawings he did in and around Canton, he mentions either the Pazhouta or the nearly identical Chigangta Pagoda and included an architectural drawing of it in his book. In his chapter on Chinese towers, he notes that 'The towers the Chinese call Taa, Europeans, likewise, call these pagodas' (*ibid.*, plate V). He built the first pagoda (almost a copy of the Pazhouta) in the West at Kew Gardens, Surrey, in 1761 as a folly for the mother of King George III (Connor, 1979:78-82).

Most Chinese words which have found their way into English date from the period of the old seaborne China Trade when Westerners were largely restricted to Canton. Words such as *tea, chow, china, coolie, kowtow, ketchup, mandarin, typhoon*, even 'pidgin' English, can be traced to the age of the Canton System, which lasted from roughly 1600-1860, making the early Western experience with China overwhelmingly limited to Canton, and absolutely limited to Canton after the Imperial edict of 1757. This edict meant that virtually every foreign visitor to China had to stop at the Whampoa Anchorage, and -- except for the supercargoes and top officers of the ship who could stay in the foreign buildings or 'hongs' at Canton-- most sailors were required to remain with their ships at Whampoa during the months-long trading season. It

is likely that many, if not most, sailors visited the Pazhouta during their stay, finding it of particular local interest.

Beginning in the century following the construction of the Pazhouta pagoda, traders and sailors from Sweden, Denmark, France, Holland, Austria, Spain, Portugal, England, and, lastly, America, all began frequenting Canton, and therefore anchoring their ships at Whampoa. The term 'pagoda' itself was in existence in Western writing already in 1588, prior to the construction of the Pazhouta pagoda (1597-1600), so the Pazhouta could not have been the source of the borrowing of 'pagoda' into all the Western languages. That borrowing must have occurred via the intermediary of the Portuguese, the first Europeans to make maritime contact with China.

However, with Canton as the focal point for Westerners visiting China and the Pazhouta pagoda as a distinctive cultural landmark, perhaps Canton can be credited with the West's rapid awareness of the pagoda and hence widespread awareness of the term itself. Sailing home to make their fortunes in ships heavy with tea, silk, or porcelain, many travelers would also bring souvenirs from their exotic travels; and among the souvenirs were very likely landscape paintings containing a distinctive multitiered tower. The above linguistic, historical and artistic clues should direct us toward China as the source of the word pagoda.

- *Pinyin is the contemporary Romanization method used in China today.
- **Wade-Gilles is an earlier, widely used Romanization system for Chinese. Many traditional English names of Chinese places, personages, and things are based on the Wade-Gilles Romanization system.

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p. 747: ‘*pagoda*... Oriental temple. ...borrowing of Portuguese *pagode*, perhaps from Tamil *pagavadi*, from Sanskrit *bhágavati* goddess, feminine of *bhágavant*- blessed, from *bhága-s* good fortune, related to *bhájate* receives as his share, enjoys, and Greek *phagein* to eat, from Indo-European **bhag*- apportion (Pok. 107).’
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p. 339: ‘*Pagoda*: del port. *pagode* “ídolo oriental”, “donde se venera”, del dravídico *pagôdi*—propriamente nombre de Cali, esposa del dios Çiva--, a su vez del scr. *bhagavatī* “diosa” ...’ --- [then further detail about this etymology, relying heavily on Dalgado 1921]
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p.181: 'PAGODE. Du persan *بئكدۀ* *boutkedè* ou *poutkoudè*, temple d'idoles, formé de *بت* *bout* ou *pout*, idole, et de *kedè* ou *koudè*, maison.

Eironnach (sic: just one name) 1852. See below: NQ (= Notes and Queries).

Elliott, Robert 1833. *Views of the East: Comprising India, Canton, and the Shores of the Red Sea*, 2 vols. See vol. 2, opposite p. 1, under "Pagoda."

Ge Hong. *Zi Yuan* (字原) [An etymological dictionary of Chinese characters]

Giles, Herbert Allen 1878. *A Glossary of Reference on Subjects Connected With The Far East*. (2nd edition: 1886). London: Trübner. p. 101: 'PAGODA 寶塔 -- precious t'a or pile. A circular or octagonal building always of an odd number of storeys, originally raised over relics of Buddha, bones of Buddhist saints, etc., but now built chiefly in connexion with Fêng-shui. The word has been derived from the Portuguese *pagão* = Latin *paganus*; also from the Portuguese pronunciation of the Indian *dagoba*, in addition to which we commend to our readers a common term in use among the Chinese themselves, viz: 白骨塔 -- white bones towers, pronounced *poh-kuh-t'a*. See *Stûpa*.'

p. 136: STÛPA 數斗婆 --A raised mound or tower for containing relics--originally, the various parts (84,000 in all) of Buddha's body. The modern pagoda.

Guangzhou International (Internet website): English.gz.gov.cn – (See entry on ancient pagoda).

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Jahrgang 36, vol. 67, pp. 197-212. ----

p. 200: 'Zweifelhaften Ursprungs ist das Wort *Pagode*. Ich meine hiermit nicht die indischen Götzenbilder, nicht den ewig nickenden Pagoden, der den Zorn des philosophierenden Narciss erregt, nicht den Pagoden, sondern die Pagode, speciell die chinesische Pagode, jenes turmartige Bauwerk, aus fünf, sieben oder neun Stockwerken bestehend, das der kirchturmlosen chinesischen Landschaft den architektonischen Charakter des Landes aufdrückt. Im Jürgens findet sich dafür ein persisches und hindostanisches *but-kadah* zu Grunde gelegt, und zwar soll *but* Götzenbild, *kadah* "Haus" bedeuten; nach anderen ist *Pagoda* die portugiesische Verdrehung eines indischen *dagoba*; noch weniger wahrscheinlich ein portugiesisches Wort *pagão*, aus dem lateinischen *paganus* entstanden. Am meisten einleuchtend ist noch die von Giles (im *Far East Glossary*) vorgeschlagene chinesische Etymologie, wonach eine der verschiedenen chinesischen Bezeichnungen eines solchen, von Haus aus wohl dem buddhistischen Dienste gewidmeten Gebäuden, *pai-ku-t'a*, d.h. "Turm der weißen Knochen", ist. Der Sage nach sollen diese Türme als Grabzeichen für Gebeine Buddhas oder buddhistischer Heiliger errichtet worden sein.'

[Translation of the last six lines (starting with: 'Am meisten einleuchtend')]:

'The most plausible etymology is still the one proposed by Giles (in the *Far East Glossary*), according to which it is one of the various Chinese designations of such a [house], originally dedicated to Buddhist ministry, *pai-ku-t'a*, i.e., "tower of the white bones." According to legend, these towers were erected as grave markers for the bones of Buddha or Buddhist saints.'

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p. 527: '**Pagode**...zu aind. *bhagavatī*, "die Erhabene", was in mundartl. Form dt. Entdeckungsreisende und Kaufleute seit 1598 gebrauchen. ...'

(The authors cite Lokotsch 1927 and Schulz-Basler 2, 283f.)

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Littmann, Enno 1924. *Morgenländische Wörter im Deutschen*.

Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr. Page 128: ‘...die Pagode, ein indisches Wort, das wir in seiner malayischen Form gebrauchen.’ Translation: ‘the Pagode, an Indian [i.e. from India] word which we use in its Malayan form.’

Lokotsch, Karl 1927. *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der Europäischen (Germanischen, Romanischen und Slavischen) Wörter Orientalischen Ursprungs*. Heidelberg: Carl Winter. --- *Pagoda* is treated in item #373: ‘Pers. *butkädä*: “Götzentempel” [aus pers. *but* “Götzenbild” Horn NpEt S. 42, Nr. 182 und *kädä* “Haus” ebenda S. 188., Nr. 844; *käd*, *kädä* ist der Ort, wo sich etwas dauernd befindet, untergebracht oder aufbewahrt wird, vgl. Bartholomae in *ZfdWf* VI, 354.’

Mendoza, J.G. 1588. *History of the Kingdome of China* (R. Parke, trans.). See page 402.

NQ = Notes and Queries, p. 415, May 1852. Brief item by Eironnach (sic: just one name) titled Pagoda, Joss House, Fetiche. The relevant portion is:

‘No such word as Pagoda is known in the native languages: Dewal, according to Mr. Forbes (*Orient. Mem.* vol. i. p. 25.), is the proper name. I have read somewhere or another that Pagoda is a name invented by the Portuguese from the Persian “Pentgheda,” meaning a temple of idols.’

OED3 = Oxford English Dictionary, 3rd (online) edition:

‘...The ultimate origin of the Portuguese *pagode* is uncertain and disputed. It was once thought to be < Persian *but-kada* idol temple < *but* idol + *kada* habitation, but now seems more likely to be either < Tamil *pā kavata* devotee of Vishnu (< Sanskrit *bhāgavata* pertaining to the Lord (Vishnu), worshipper of Vishnu or the goddess *Bhagavati*: see below), or < Tamil *pakavati* (name of a) goddess (< Sanskrit *bhagavatī* goddess, alternative name of the goddess Kali).

‘Sense 3 arose from the fact that the image of the goddess was stamped on the coin (compare quot. 1598 at sense 3a.)

‘[Sense 3a]: ‘A gold or silver coin of higher denomination than the rupee, formerly current in southern India. Now *hist.*

1598 W. Phillip tr. J. H. van Linschoten *Disc. Voy. E. & W. Indies* I. xxxv. 69/1 They are Indian and Heathenish money, with the picture of a Diuell vpon them, and therefore are called *Pagodes* [Du. *pagodes*].’

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