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A Note on the Etymology of the Tangut Name Ngwemi

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Many Tangut family names are attested in both Chinese and Tangut sources. However, the etymology of those names has not yet been thoroughly investigated. In this note, I will present evidence for explaining the origin of the most famous of all Tangut names, that of the imperial family, transcribed in Chinese as *Wéimíng* 嵬名 and in original Tangut *ŋwe²mji¹* 𐞧𐞮𐞰.¹

Stoddard (1997: 90 n. 73) proposed equating Tangut *ŋwe²mji¹* 𐞧𐞮𐞰 with the name of the Tangut emperor as it appears in a Tibetan myth attested in several fourteenth-century Tangut texts.² According to these texts the First Tangut emperor, when he was a child, was abandoned and nourished by a cow.³ His name *Ngo.snu'i* is explained in the following way (quoting the version of this story found in the *Deb.ther dmar-po*):

rus.pa	ngo.snu'i	zhes-pa	Bod-skad-du	bsgyur-na ll	ba-la	'o.ma
bone	Ngosnu'i	call-NMLZ	Tibet-language-ALL	translate.PST-if	cow-DAT	milk
'thung-ba	zhes	zer				
drink-NMLZ	call	say				

His clan name was *Ngo.snu'i*, which can be translated into Tibetan as “he who drinks milk from the cow.”

However, in Jacques 2008 I showed that this name *Ngo.snu'i* was not a transcription of the actual Tangut imperial family name *ŋwe²mji¹* 𐞧𐞮𐞰, but instead a rendition in Tibetan orthography of the Tangut form **ŋwe²nju²* 𐞧𐞮𐞱, which can be translated as “the cow (*ŋwe²* 𐞧) gives milk (*nju²* 𐞱),” or rather, in the context of a personal name, “the one who was fed milk by the cow.”

It can hardly be a coincidence that the first syllable of the name *ŋwe²mji¹* 𐞧𐞮𐞰 itself, though written differently, is homophonous with *ŋwe²* 𐞧 ‘cow’, and the second syllable is homophonous with *mji¹* 𐞰 ‘feed’. *mji¹* 𐞰 is an irregular verb whose first and second singular form is *mjo²* 𐞰.⁴ It can be used with a human object:

𐞧𐞮𐞱	𐞧	𐞰	𐞱𐞰	𐞰	𐞱𐞰
<i>tchji² rjar²</i>	<i>tchji¹</i>	<i>lwə²</i>	<i>miej² tsə¹</i>	<i>.jji¹</i>	<i>dja²-mji¹</i>
immediately	meat	buy	Mengzi	GEN	PFT-feed[A]

She (Mengzi’s mother) immediately bought meat and gave it to Mengzi. (Leilin, 03.02A.6–7, Kepping 1983)

I wish to thank Nathan Hill for insightful comments about this paper.

1. In the present paper I use Gong (2002)’s reconstruction. Numbers under Tangut characters are the references from Li (1997). Glosses follow the Leipzig glossing rules; see <http://www.eva.mpg.de/lingua/resources/glossing-rules.php>, accessed 30 June, 2010.

2. The texts in question are the *Deb.ther dmar-po*, the *Rgyal.rabs gsal-ba'i me.long*, and the *Yar.lung jo.bo'i chos.'byung*, cf. Stoddard 1997: 88.

3. This legend has been translated several times in various languages, including French (Stein 1951, Jacques 2008), English (Sørensen 1986, Stoddard 1997), and Chinese (Chén and Zhōu 1984). Therefore, there is no need to provide here a new translation of these documents.

4. On vowel alternation in Tangut see Gong 2001 and Jacques 2009.

A sentence such as **ŋwe²mji¹* 𐰚𐰏, though not actually attested in the known Tangut corpus, would mean “the cow feeds someone” or “fed by the cow.” It is highly probable that the etymology of the name *ŋwe²mji¹* 𐰚𐰏, otherwise entirely opaque,⁵ can be explained in this way.

We assume that the myth concerning the origin of the First Tangut emperor mentioned in the *Deb.ther dmar-po*, the *Rgyal.rabs gsal-ba'i me.long*, and the *Yar.lung jo.bo'i chos.'byung* at least partially reflects a genuine Tangut myth. The name *Ngo.snu'i* attested in those Tibetan texts, as we said before, is not a transcription of *ŋwe²mji¹* 𐰚𐰏. Rather, it is the transcription in Tibetan script of an explanation in the Tangut language (**ŋwe²nju²* 𐰚𐰏) of the meaning of the name *ŋwe²mji¹* 𐰚𐰏, since *mji¹* 𐰏 and *nju²* 𐰏 are very close semantically. This implies that in the fourteenth century Tibetan scholars may still have had contact with speakers of Tangut who knew the etymology of the name *ŋwe²mji¹* 𐰚𐰏. Since the Tangut language was still spoken in the fourteenth century,⁶ this hypothesis is very probable. Unfortunately, no known trace of this myth is recorded in either Tangut or Chinese texts as far as we know; it has only been preserved in a Tibetan version.

This study shows that even late Tibetan sources have a considerable role to play in the study of Tangut history and mythology.

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5. The characters 𐰚 and 𐰏 both include the character *cji²* 𐰏 ‘sacred’ with a phonetic element: the right part of *ŋwe²* 𐰚 for the former, and the right, top, and left parts of *mji¹* 𐰏 for the latter. 𐰏 only appears in the name 𐰚𐰏, while 𐰚 is otherwise only attested in three other Tangut names.

6. The last dated text is the Bǎodìng inscription from 1502, see Shǐ (1993: 301).