CHINESE “BUY” AND “SELL” AND THE DIRECTION OF BORROWINGS BETWEEN CHINESE AND HMONG-MIEN: A RESPONSE TO HAUDRICOURT AND STRECKER

BY

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Recently André-G. Haudricourt and David Strecker have argued that agriculture is not an original element in Chinese culture, but was acquired when the earliest speakers of Chinese, allegedly nomadic pastoralists speaking a language closely related to Proto-Tibeto-Burman, descended “with their flocks of sheep” from the interior regions of Asia into the irrigated coastal plains, there coming into contact with Hmong-Mien peoples who – Haudricourt and Strecker reason – were already settled agriculturalists.

Early, pre-literate Chinese society was, then, in their view, one in which a class of Sino-Tibetan nobles with a pastoral tradition reigned over a mass of Hmong-Mien peasants. Haudricourt and Strecker further speculate that the former, as pastoralists, were possessed of an ethic in which gifts were a source of prestige, while the latter, as peasants, were more commercially oriented. In their view, the language of the nobles, an early form of Chinese, lacked any agricultural and commercial vocabulary: the historical Chinese vocabulary of agriculture and commerce consists essentially of loans made from the language of the indigenous peasants, an early form of Hmong-Mien.

The article of Haudricourt and Strecker purports to provide support for this theory by adducing linguistic evidence of borrowing of agricultural and commercial vocabulary from Hmong-Mien.

1 A preliminary version of this paper was presented at the 27th International Conference on Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics, Sèvres, October 12-16, 1994.


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into Chinese. Thus, they claimed a Hmong-Mien origin for the following Chinese words: 幼 “young rice plant”; 稻 “unhulled rice”; 麦 “flour”; 麵 “bread, pastry”; and 買 “buy” and 賣 “sell”. However, only in the case of the last pair of words, “buy” and “sell”, did they bolster their view with linguistic arguments tending to establish the direction of borrowing from Hmong-Mien into Chinese: borrowing into Chinese was suggested by them for the other words only “in the light of our agricultural hypothesis”. From this one perceives that the case built by Haudricourt and Strecker around the words for “buy” and “sell” is crucial to their historical argument.

The new theory advanced by Haudricourt and Strecker is important because, if verified, it could solve a problem inherent with the class of theories which regard Chinese as intrusive in northern China: these theories clash with the evidence of archaeology, where continuity from the earliest neolithic down to modern times is evident. Thus, if one wishes to maintain that Chinese is not indigenous to north China, one needs to answer the question: “Who were the early farmers of north China?”. The answer of Haudricourt and Strecker is that they were early Hmong-Mien speakers.

But were they really? There are strong grounds, linguistic and other, for rejecting their general hypothesis. In sections 1 and 2 I will show that there is every reason to think that the commercial and agricultural vocabulary shared by Chinese and Hmong-Mien (including and especially the key items “buy” and “sell”) was actually borrowed by Hmong-Mien rather than the other way around. In section 3 I will discuss some graphic evidence cited by Haudricourt and Strecker in support of their historical model. In section 4 I will discuss some issues of archaeology and anthropology which are directly relevant to the question of Chinese origins.

1. The commercial vocabulary: “buy” and “sell”

Haudricourt and Strecker pointed out that the Proto-Hmong-Mien words for “buy” and “sell” – something like *maiB and *maiC – were quite similar to the corresponding Chinese words: maiB and maiC, respectively, in Li’s Middle Chinese notation.

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3 ibid., p. 339.
4 Unless otherwise indicated, Old Chinese (OC) transcriptions follow Baxter’s system, and Middle Chinese (MC) transcriptions follow Li Fang-kui.