Etymological Notes on Early Chinese Aristocratic Titles

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Recent studies of the canonical Five Ranks (wudeng 五等, known from Mencius 5B.2 and related texts) by Li Feng and Yuri Pines\(^1\) contain many useful observations, but neither one discusses the etymologies. Most of the titles can be shown to originate in kinship terms and reflect the early Chinese conception of political power as supervening on lineage status.\(^2\) Traditional Sinology, both in East Asia and in the West, has unjustifiably contented itself with examining usage and graphic variation, without considering etymology, which is possible only by considering the forms in Old Chinese. Etymology being an inexact science, the ideas offered below are necessarily tentative, but I hope they will help us overcome the fusty renderings “duke, marquis, earl, viscount, and baron,” which vary from occasionally defensible (marquis) to wholly preposterous (viscount).

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To begin with *gong* 公 (*C.qˤoŋ*),³ the highest of the Five Ranks: the etymon must be "senior lineage male." *Weng* 翁 (*qˤoŋ-s*), "father, grandfather, father-in-law, respectful term for an old man," is obviously cognate.⁴ *Fangyan* 方言 even records that *weng* was regionally attested for *gong* in the sense of "senior, old."⁵ This explains passages where *gong* is closer to "patriarch" than "duke" or "lord."⁶ For example, the various personages known as Mao *gong* 毛公 in archaic texts and bronze inscriptions (e.g., Ban *gui* 班簋 and Mao *gong ding* 毛公鼎)⁷ are best understood as patriarchs of the Mao lineage, whose members were related to the royal house of Zhou, and were treated with respect by Western Zhou kings.⁸ Since patriarchs of prominent lineages were also commonly lords of estates, the senses of "patriarch" and "lord" do overlap, and the name Mao could also denote Mao *gong*’s territory.⁹ But "Duke of Mao" is not an advisable translation of Mao *gong*, as the relatively small settlement of Mao was not a duchy in any plausible sense. ("Duke of Zhou" for Zhou *gong* 周公 makes even less sense.) The etymon "patriarch" also explains the common practice, recognized even in antiquity,¹⁰ of applying the title *gong* to a deceased lord, regardless of

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⁷ *Yin Zhou jinwen jicheng* 殷周金文集成, ed. Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo 中國社會科學院考古研究所 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1984–94), nos. 4341 and 2841, respectively.
¹⁰ E.g., Zhong Wenzheng 中文乘 (1818–1877), *Chunqiu Guliang jingzhuan buzhu* 春秋穀梁經傳補注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1996), 4.129 (Huan 桓 18): "When [a lord] is buried, he is called *gong*; he is raised to the highest [rank]" 閏稱公，舉上也.
his rank. Many of the “patriarchs” invoked in bronze inscriptions were, in fact, deceased ancestors.

The derived sense of “the general good” (as opposed to si 私, “private interest”) appeared only in the Eastern Zhou; it bespeaks the new and despotic notion that whatever pertains to the lord of a polity pertains to that polity and its population generally.\textsuperscript{11} (L’état c’est le gong.) Thus the phrase gongtian 公田, which is presented as “public fields, fields worked communally, etc.” in the Confucian fantasy in Mencius 3A.3,\textsuperscript{12} would have referred originally to the lord’s fields, i.e. the fields that peasants were required to till in addition to whatever their family possessed. Hence the line in Mao 212 (“Datian” 大田): “May it rain on our lord’s fields, and then reach our own” 雨我公田,遂及我私。

The second of the Five Ranks, hou 侯 (*[g]ˤ(r)o) is nearly homophonous with the title hou 后 (*ɢˤ(r)oʔ),\textsuperscript{13} which usually means “queen” or “dowager,” but can also be borne by males (as in houji 后稷, Lord Millet, i.e. Qi 捺, the mythic progenitor of the Zhou people). Some scholars doubt that the two are cognate.\textsuperscript{14} Regardless, both the word hou and its graph (侯, with an embedded arrow 矢)\textsuperscript{15} disclose connections with archery. For example, hou 鐦 (*[g]ˤ(r)o or *[g]ˤ(r)o-s) refers to a feathered arrow with a metal head,\textsuperscript{16} and hou 侯 itself can mean “target” (as in shehou 射侯, “to shoot at the target,” in Mao 106 [“Yijie” 矝嗟]).\textsuperscript{17} The word evidently reflects the cultural conception of a lord as a practiced and self-possessed marksman, and Peter A. Boodberg proposed the translation “archer.

\textsuperscript{11} See the references in Paul R. Goldin, After Confucius: Studies in Early Chinese Philosophy (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawai‘i Press, 2005), 185, n. 6.
\textsuperscript{12} The critique in Wan Guoding 萬國鼎 (1897–1963), Zhongguo tianzhi shi 中國田制史 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2011), 88–97, is still valid.
\textsuperscript{14} Thus, Axel Schuessler, ABC Etymological Dictionary of Old Chinese (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawai‘i Press, 2007), 283.
\textsuperscript{15} For representative palaeographical forms, see Guwenzi gulin 古文字詁林 (Shanghai: Shanghai jiaoyu chubanshe, 1999–2004), vol. 5, 479–84.
\textsuperscript{17} See also the oft-quoted definition of hou 矝 in Jiang Renjie 蔣人傑, Shuowen jiezi jizhu 說文解字集注, ed. Liu Rui 劉銳 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1999), 5B.1081–82: “the target at which one shoots during the spring sacrifice” 春饗所射矝也.
lord.” It is one of the oldest titles, abundantly attested in oracle-bone inscriptions. Significantly, it is not a kinship term, and this may be why it was not applied to nobles and administrators in the Zhou court. A Zhou-dynasty *hou* was entrusted with regions on the periphery, and thus the traditional rendering “marquis” is not absurd. My only question is why, if Sinological practice favors the English title “earl” for *bo* (伯) (and not the French equivalent, “count”), we use the French title “marquis” for *hou* (and not the English equivalent, “marquess”).

*Bo* (*pˤrak*) is indeed a kinship term: “eldest brother, father’s elder brother, elder lineage male.” It contrasts with *shu* (叔 (*s-tiwk*), “father’s younger brother, husband’s younger brother, etc.” Pines criticizes translators for mechanically rendering *Zhi bo* 知/智伯 as “Earl of Zhi,” and I have been guilty of this very lapse in judgment. (Now I would say “Elder of Zhi.”) Moreover, in phrases like *Xibo* 西伯 (an epithet of King Wen 文王), *bo* is best understood as “overlord” or the like, since it is cognate with *ba* 霸 (*pˤrak-s*), “hegemon.” (Evidently the eldest brother was expected to be the protector.) Or when the sage *Yu* is called *bo*, the title probably should be translated as “protector” (or maybe “ealdorman”) rather than “earl.”

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18 Selected Works of Peter A. Boodberg, ed. Alvin P. Cohen (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1979), 217. (He also suggested the unwieldy neologism “scoparch.”) Cf. Li Feng, Bureaucracy and the State in Early China: Governing the Western Zhou (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008), 44, n. 4; Susanne Adamski, Die Darstellung des Bogenschießens in Bronzeinschriften der West-Zhōu-Zeit (1045–771 v. Chr.): Eine philologische Quellenanalyse (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2017), 24–25, seems unconvinced.


20 Cf. Li Feng, “Transmitting Antiquity,” 112.


22 Pines, “Names and Titles in Eastern Zhou Texts,” 714, recommends “Zhi the Elder,” but this is confusing, because it would imply that his son was “Zhi the Younger” (as Seneca the Elder was the father of Seneca the Younger).


24 Most famously in *Shangshu jiaoshi yilun*, vol. 1, 192 (“Yaodian” 堯典), but the phrase *bo* Yu 伯禹 is not rare. Note that the pseudo-Kong Anguo 孔安國 commentary, followed by other scholiasts, interprets this *bo* as an abbreviation for Chong *bo* 崇伯, “Lord of Chong,” the title of Yu’s father, Gun 鲁; that is to say, Yu has succeeded his father (*Shangshu jiaoshi yilun*, vol. 1, 205, n. 12).
The title zi 子 (*tsəʔ) must derive from its straightforward sense of “child, son,”25 and is borne by royal princes in oracle-bone inscriptions (hence also taizi 太子, “crown prince”—never “heir apparent”),26 but as the fourth of the Five Ranks, it is not commensurate with princely status. Thus I suspect that it refers in such contexts not to royal sons, but to noble sons27—in other words, something close to junzi 君子, lit. “son of a lord,” or someone whose own nobility derives from that of his father (before the term was stripped of aristocratic pretense and assigned purely moral criteria).28

Axel Schuessler has suggested that cai 才/財/材 (*[dz]ˤə), “talent, wealth, timber,” is cognate with zi.29 The phrase caizi 才子 (*[dz]ˤə- tsəʔ), “talented son(s),” should, in any case, be regarded as a euphonious reduplicative (diezi 录字), throwing new light on passages such as Wen 文 18 in Zuozhuan 左傳, which relates the “talented descendants” (caizi) and “untalented descendants” (bu 不 caizi) of various legendary clans.30 But I am not aware of any evidence that the title zi itself was understood as caizi, “talented lord,” as attractive as that would be.

The etymology of the lowest of the Five Ranks, nan 男 (*nˤ[ə]m), “male,” is unknown.31 Perhaps it is related to ren 任 (*n[ə]m-s), “to bear a load, to be placed in charge.”

25 The problem with Boodberg’s “thane” (Selected Writings of Peter A. Boodberg, 215) is that, although it is related to Greek teknon, “child,” in Old English usage “thane” (þegn) always referred to the king’s “servitor, follower, warrior,” never the king’s “child, son.”

26 An heir apparent is someone whose right to succeed is indefeasible and hence cannot be abrogated even by the sovereign. See, e.g., Charles Sweet (1849–1906), A Dictionary of English Law (London: Henry Sweet, 1882), 400. The title belongs to a system of divine-right primogeniture like that of monarchic England, not traditional China, where the sovereign almost always retained the right to choose (and oust) his heir. Thus “crown prince” is preferable.

27 Gassmann, Verwandtschaft und Gesellschaft im alten China, 343 et passim, uses “Junker.”


29 Schuessler, ABC Etymological Dictionary of Old Chinese, 175.

30 Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhu, vol. 2, 636–42. This happens to be the oldest extant source of the name Taotie 饕餮, which has been misleadingly applied to the theriomorphic décor on Shang and Zhou bronzes.

31 It is perfectly homophonous with nan 南 (*nˤ[ə]m), “south,” but there is no self-evident connection.
Finally, some thoughts on the basic word for “lord”: jun 君 (*C.qur). The graph itself invites comparison with yin 尹, “custodian, governor, overseer,” but the Old Chinese reconstruction of yin is unclear. William H. Baxter and Laurent Sagart propose *m-qurʔ for yin because they believe it is cognate, but Schuessler objects that the rhymes do not agree. I would look to qun 羣/*[g]ur), “flock, aggregation,” and possibly also jun 軍 (*[k]ʷər < *C.qur), “army.”35 When Xunzi 荀子 tells us that a jun 君 is so called because he “is able to make [the people] flock together” 能羣也,36 an idea repeated in later texts, perhaps that is not another Confucian fantasy.

33 Baxter and Sagart, Old Chinese: A New Reconstruction, 82.
34 Schuessler, ABC Etymological Dictionary of Old Chinese, 328.
35 On the diphthongization of *-ur to *-war, see Baxter and Sagart, 255. Though they have been pure homophones since Middle Chinese, the connection between jun 軍 and jun 君 is uncertain. Nathan W. Hill, The Historical Phonology of Tibetan, Burmese, and Chinese (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2019), 38, 207–8, and 241, associates jun 軍 and jun 郡 with ostensibly unrelated Tibetan words.
36 Wang Xianqian 王先謙 (1842–1917), Xunzi jijie 荀子集解 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1988), 8.12.237 (“Jundao 君道”). In Xunzi jijie 5.9.164 (“Wangzhi 王制”), the capacity of neng qun 能羣 is the reason why humans dominate all other species, a suggestion that all people are, to some extent, jun.
37 After Xunzi, jun and the derivative “commandery” jun 郡 (*[g]ur-s) were repeatedly glossed with qun 羣/羣: see, e.g., a fragment from Fengsu tongyi 風俗通義 in Wang Liqi 王利器, Fengsu tongyi jiaozhu 風俗通義校注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1981), 492; Chen Li 陳立 (1809–1869), Baihu tong shuzheng 白虎通疏證 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1994), 8.376 (“Sangang liuji 統領六紀”); and Wang Xianqian, Shiming shuzheng bu 釋名疏證補 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2008), 2.7.59 (“Shi zhouguo” 釋州國).