

Etymology of the word Taifun

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This word, first used by *Pinto* in 1560, in his description of the terrible whirlwinds raging in the seas of southern China, and expressly stated by him to be a chinese term for these winds, has been hitherto a puzzle to all students.

It has been thought to be the same as the greek word *typhon* (τυφών) (Lecomte, 1893), or been identified with the Cantonese *tai-fung* (大風), "a great wind", an identification to which the late sinologue *Mayers* objected (Notes and Queries on China and Japan, Vol. III, p. 10).

MM. *Taintor* and *Kingsmill* advocated the derivation from the Arab *tâfân*, from the root *tâfa* (Ibid. p. 42-43); an opinion which *Mr. K. Himly* also defended in a learned dissertation. *Dr. F. Hirth*, the wellknown german sinologue, has returned to the question and states again, that the word is a genuine chinese one, as in the *Tai-wan-fu tchi*, a chinese work on Formosa, these terrible winds are called *t'ai* (風台), a character not to be found in the imp. dict. of the emperor *K'ang-hi*. Thus far, he is quite right; but his etymology of the word is totally wrong. He declares the character to be composed of the radical 風 *fung*, Wind, and the abbreviated form of the character 臺 *tai* 台, occurring in the chinese name of the island of Formosa: 臺灣 *Tai-wan*, also written 台灣; so that it would mean "the wind of Formosa".

Now, if Dr. Hirth had known the Amoy colloquial ¹⁾, he would never have proposed such a far-fetched etymology. In Amoy and environs these terrible storms are called *hong t'ai*, properly transcribed 風胎 or “womb (*t'ai*) of storm (*hong*)”, which is only a colloquial translation of the classical term 颶母 *kü-mu*, “Mother of storm”.

Let us hear what the Chinese have to say about this term, which we, moreover, have already explained in 1882 in our “Nederlandsch-Chineesch Woordenboek” (Dutch-Chinese Dictionary) s. v. *Orkaan, Storm and Typhon*.

The 嶺表錄異 *Ling-piao luh i* says: “In the southern seas, between summer and autumn, the clouds are circled by a confused halo resembling a rainbow, and which has an extension of six to seven feet. This is a sure presage that a typhoon is brewing; and it is therefore called “Mother o’ typhoon”. But when a sudden clap of thunder happens, the typhoon does not break out. Sailors always consider it as a foreboding, and take their precautions against it betimes” ²⁾.

The character 颶 is composed of 風 *fung*, “wind” and 具 *kü*, “everywhere”, because the typhoon shifts to all cardinal points ³⁾. Other names for the typhoon are 懼風 *kü fung*, the terrible wind; 黑風 *heh fung*, the black wind; 颶潮風 *yang chau fung*, the

1) We must caution all sinologues who wish to treat of Formosa, to pay a due regard to the Amoy-colloquial language, as most of the Chinese in that island are Amoyites.

2) 南海秋夏間、或雲物慘然 (sic! for 參然^{?)} 有暈如虹。長六七尺。此候則颶風必發。故呼爲颶母。見忽有震雷、則颶風不作矣。舟人常以爲候。預爲備之。 Vide Encyclopedia 格致鏡原, Chap. III, fol. 5 verso, Art. 風名號, Names and designations of Winds.

3) 颶者具四面之風也。 Vide 南越志, quoted in the same Encyclopedia.

wind which whirls up the tide; 破輓風 *p'o-yih fung*, the yoke-breaking wind, etc. The book "Five elements of the labourer" (田家五行) says: "The storms raging during the junction of summer and autumn, when the sand of the sea rises in clouds, are called *Fung chau*, "Wind-tide"; the ancient called them *Kü fung*; the sailors also call them the yoke-breaking wind" ¹).

Luh-yeu says: "At the outskirts of the *Ling* (*Meiling* = present *Kwang-tung* and *Kwang-si*) "Mothers of noxious vapors" are met with, which, at their first appearance, are round and black; they then slowly expand themselves, and they are called "Mother o' typhoon" ²).

In the Canton dialect the typhoon is called *fung kaü* or *ta-fung kaü*, written with a local character 風倂 or 打風倂. Wells Williams (Tonic Dict. of the Chin. lang. in the Canton dialect, p. 140a) says: "倂: a colloquial word; a loaf, a lump, piece, clod... *ta fung kaü*, a high gale"; but Chalmers, in his English and Cantonese pocketdictionary, calls a typhoon *fung kaü*, which thus literally translated means "The lump of storm". We note here that our sailors call such a black lump portentous of storm "a stain of oil".

From these names *Hong t'ai*, "Womb of wind", *Fung kaü*, "Lump of wind" and 颶母 *Kü mu*, "Mother o' typhoon", it clearly appears that with the expression *T'ai* is not meant the typhoon itself, but its foreboding black cloud; or, as the Germans would say, "die sturmesschwangere Wolke" (the tempest-pregnant cloud).

This is best illustrated in the Amoy Colloquial. Douglas says:

¹ 夏秋之交大風及海沙雲起謂之風潮。古人名之曰颶風。航海之人又名之破輓風。

² 陸游曰。嶺表有瘴母。初起圍黑、久漸廣。謂之颶母。

hong thai a typhoon; *hong-thai h̄* 風胎雨, violent squalls of rain in a typhoon (*lit.* rains from the storm-womb); *ū thai* (有胎) there is a typhoon brewing; which latter expression also means she (or it) is pregnant¹); compare 懷胎 *hoái thai*, to be pregnant; 受胎 *siū t'ai*, to be impregnated, to conceive; 坐胎 *tsē thai* or 在胎, to be in the womb, as a child²); 出母胎 *ch'ut bú-thai*, newly born from its mothers womb; 火胎 *hé thai*, *lit.* "womb of fire", "fiery womb", exceedingly sultry weather. The *Pēi-wen-yun-fu* quotes the 禍胎 *ho t'ai*, the womb (mother) of misfortune, and the 混沌胎 *hun-t'un t'ai*, the womb (embryo) of chaos, etc.

The chinese character in the *Tai-wan-fu chi* 風台 *thai* is simply a pedantic transcription of the Amoy colloquial name *hong* (風 wind) and 台 for 胎 *thai*, womb = "The mother of storm". It has nothing to do, as Dr. Hirth supposes, with *Tai-wan*, the *tai* of which has in Amoy no aspiration, whilst *thai* of the name for typhoon is aspirated. Besides, Formosa is not subject to tyfoons. The Rev. W. Campbell, in a lately published article on "The island of Formosa" (*Scottish geogr. Magazine* for August 1896), distinctly says: "Severe storms sometimes occur during midsummer, but these terrible tyfoons which start in the China sea and travel northward, usually slant off at South Cape to drive with full force across the low-lying Pescadores, or over the islands of Botel Tobago and Samusana to the east of Formosa".

Now as this tempest-pregnant cloud is called as well in Amoy *hong t'ai* (風胎) as in Canton *fung-kaū* (風俗), and not *t'ai-hong* or *kaū fung*, the question if Pinto's *taifun* is = the Chinese

1) 氣從有胎中息, the spirit breathes already during the pregnancy (of the mother). Vide *Pēi-wen-yun-fu*.

2) 老君在胎八十一年, Lao-kiun was 81 years in his mothers womb. *Ibid.*

fung t'ai 風胎 still remains an open one; for he could possibly have heard the name *taifun* from his Fuhkien or Canton pilots; and we must return again to the Cantonese *tai fung* (大風, Wells Williams, Dict. of the Canton dialect, p. 65), "a gale, a typhoon", for the explanation of this term, if it be indeed a genuine chinese one.

Pinto could never have heard the term from an Amoy pilot, because at that locality wind is called *hong* and not *fung*, and, as we have said above, a typhoon is called *hong t'ai* and not *tai fung*, the latter being undoubtedly Cantonese.

When *Fah-hien* travelled from Ceylon to Java, he was overtaken by a regular typhoon which he calls 大風 *tai-fung*: 東下三日便直大風, they proceeded eastwards three days, and then encountered a *tai-fung* (storm, gale); 如是大風晝夜十三日, in this way the *tai-fung* (gale) continued day and night, during 13 days.

When sailing from Java to China, he met in the China Sea with a "black wind and tempestuous rain" (遇黑風暴雨) as Legge (p. 113) translates it¹). Now we have seen above that *black wind* is one of the chinese names for the typhoon, and that the violent squalls of rain, which always accompany these tyfoons, are called in Amoy 風胎雨 *hong-t'ai hō* (storm-womb-rains).

1) Beal, p. 169, translates: "a black squall suddenly came on, accompanied with pelting rain".
