

Stories behind “Jindou”

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While translating the story of *Rāmāyaṇa* from Khotanese into Chinese, it seems to me that the Khotanese word **hamggeils-*, appeared in the fighting plot between Rāma, Nanda on one side and the demon on the other, could very well be rendered by *fan jindou* in Chinese. After a further probing, it turned out that *jindou* must originally have been a transliteration of an Iranian word meaning *turning*. But the connotation of *jindou* oversteps the original meaning of turning. In what follows, I will tell you one story after another, and the way of Sogdian people may thus be retraced.

Part I

Jindou is a name given to a special kind of somersault in acrobatics and in Peking opera. However, *jindou* has become familiar to every Chinese is not only due to their fondness of acrobatics. It is a novel full of imagination, named *A Journey to the West* 《西游记》, written in the Ming Dynasty, which brings upon the word an international fame. In the novel, the Monkey King is endowed with a special ability by which he could span 18,000 li (km) in a fraction of a minute. The way he shows the ability is called *jindou*. In the novel there is a detailed description through the speech of the Monkey King:

“I can ride a *Jindou*-cloud. Only one *jindou* will carry me across a distance of 18,000 li.”¹

“As Sanzang(Xuan Zhuang) did not pay him attention, out of his temper, he jumped up saying: ‘Senior Sun² is leaving.’ Sanzang hurried to raise his head, but Sun was already out of sight.”

Since the birth of *A Journey to the West*, the Monkey King has been living on with his *jindou* from generation to generation in China. In modern times, the novel has many times been rewritten for films and television series; therefore, *jindou* can almost be heard every day in families with a child. The novel is full of fiction, and it belongs to fiction in which things tend to be exaggerated, but still we can catch a glimpse of some real feature of the connotation of *jindou* through the speech of the Monkey King. It is clearly expressed that *jindou* can mean spanning over certain space.

Scholars are inclined to believe that the novel *A Journey to the West* has been greatly influenced by Indian literature. They suggest that on depicting the character of

¹ 吴承恩《西游记》，人民文学出版社，1994年，第184页。Wu Cheng'en: *A Journey to the West*. Renmin Literature Press, 1994, p.184

² ‘Sun’ is the family name given to the Monkey King.

the Monkey King, the author must have received inspiration from Hanuman in *Rāmayaṇa*. However, the opinion cannot be taken as a solid argument. No direct bridge between the Indian Hanuman and Chinese Monkey King can be evidently shown as to what *jindou* refers to. While Hanuman does not possess the ability to span over thousands of miles through a spring and turning, the Monkey King is not worshipped as a God as Hanuman is.

Searching through the literature of Dhyāna Buddhism, it turns out that Dhyāna Buddhism inspired the author of *A Journey to the West* when he gave to birth of the Monkey King.

In *the Sequel to the History of Lamps* (《续传灯录》), which is also a work in the Ming Dynasty with anas and anecdotes about famous monks, we read quite often such sentences as: “Where are mountains and rivers? While chucking away his crutch, he said to his followers: let’s turn *jindou* in the air and make a journey to Xinluo (Korea)”. Another example: “Lets turn *jindou* and pay a visit to the downtown area of Kosala.”

The *Sequel to the History of Lamps* is compiled during the years 1368-1398, while the novel was formed between 1500 and 1582. It is apparent that Dhyāna-Buddhism constitutes the direct source from which *jindou* has been borrowed by the author of *A Journey to the West*.

However, *jindou* with such a connotation is not a new conception of the Ming Dynasty. If we follow the tradition of Dhyāna Buddhism, we quite often find the similar use of *jindou* in compilations of quotations of famous monks in the Northern and Southern Song Dynasties. Here is another example: “At that time Puhua made a *jindou*, and the meaning could not be understood. The Ācārya explained: ‘It means jumping out of the diamond circle.’”

In this case some explanation may prove necessary before coming back to the main topic. It can be observed that, in the literature of Dhyāna Buddhism, spoken language is preferred in contrast to classical literary Chinese. There is also a likely tendency that gestures were used as language for explaining a Buddhist implication. It is generally accepted that the tendency of applying spoken language for literary purposes began in the middle of the Tang Dynasty, and schools of Dhyāna Buddhism were the initiators. It is possible that Dhyāna Buddhism in the mid- Tang Dynasty also began introducing gestures as methods and ways for expressing ideas.

We have a plausible example with Puhua. According to Dhyāna-Buddhist tradition he was the first monk who turned a *jindou* instead of using words for

explain his idea. The story behind is like this: Puhua is a disciple to the Dhyāna master Bauji(宝积禅师), who lived between the 8th and the 9th century in Youzhou (today's Beijing). As Bauji felt that he would pass away, he let his disciples describe his state. Some showed him what they painted, but he hit them all. Puhua said that he would reveal the real picture of the teacher's state. Thereafter he turned a *jindou* that meant that his master would jump out of the worldly bondage. The story has been kept on the record over the centuries in various Dhyāna Buddhist literary works.³

This is also when *jindou* was first adopted into the gesture language of Dhyāna Buddhism.

However, after turning *jindous* through certain amounts of Chinese historical literature, 2 points remain to be emphasized. Firstly, as a special kind of skill in acrobatics *jindou* is certainly a much earlier invention, as is shown on a brick painting unearthed from a grave of the Han Dynasty.⁴ This is clearly suggested by some descriptions found there. But as a technical term *jindou* was apparently not introduced until the Tang Dynasty. In *Suishu* (《隋书》), for example, we read: At the end of Sui Dynasty (around the beginning of the 7th century) there was a hero named Shengguang. He climbed once on a flagstaff higher than 10 *zhang* (≈ 30 meters) in order to fasten the flag onto the top for a monastery. Afterwards he loosened his hands and feet from the staff and dropped into the air. At last he landed with hands and walked several steps on his hands. He was then called the “carnal flying being(肉飞仙)”.⁵ According to this record, the man must have turned his body in the air, for otherwise it would not have been possible for him to land on the ground with his hands. However, throughout the description *jindou* as a term is not used.

Secondly, during the Tang Dynasty, *jindou* appeared as a special term for the body turning skill in acrobatics. We read under the special entry for *jindou* in *Records of Jiaofangji* (《教坊记》)⁶: A child belonged to Jiaofang was excellent in *jindou*. People in Jiaofang dressed him up as a performer, mixed him among other performers and asked him to show his skill on top of a long staff.

In the works of some poets in the Tang Dynasty we can also read some descriptions of turning *jindou* on top of a long staff, for example in *the Song of the Perilous Staff of Gukuang*:

翻身挂影恣腾蹋。⁷

³ 《景德传灯录》，《大正藏》册 51，第 253 页中、下栏。又见《佛祖历代通载》，《大正藏》册 49，第 612 页上栏。

⁴ 在山东安丘董家庄汉墓出土的汉画像石上，已有对顶竿的描绘，其中可见在竿上翻腾跳跃的动作。转引自刘峻骧《中国杂技史》文化艺术出版社 1998 年，第 45 页。

⁵ 《隋书》卷六十四，《列传》第二十九，中华书局，2002 年，第 1513 页。

⁶ Jiaofang (教坊) was an administrant office under Tang-dynasty whose function is in charge of imperial music. 崔令钦筋斗条下：“教坊一小儿，筋斗绝伦，乃衣以彩缯，梳洗，杂于内伎中。少顷缘长竿上，倒立，寻复去手。久之，垂手抱竿，翻身而下。”罗济平校点崔令钦《教坊记》等，辽宁教育出版社，1998 年，第 8 页。

⁷ 《全唐诗》卷二百六十五，第八册第 2948 页。

By turning her body it seems that she is only hitched to the staff by a shadow. At pleasure she flies and is back on a firm footing.

However here comes the remarkable point: When *jindou* is employed as an acrobatic term, it seems that no hint for a connotation of spanning over space can be ascertained, neither that of the word *jindou* nor of the skill of *jindou* of acrobatics.

We are thus confronted with two problems. First, where does the word *jindou* come from? Second, how does this symbolic connotation for spanning over space come into being? With these two questions I come to the second part of my paper.

Part II

Ever since *jindou* became a popular word for the Chinese after coming out of the novel *A Journey to the West*, the search for its etymon has been started. In the Ming Dynasty there was a well-known official and scholar Yu Shenxing (1545-1607) who perhaps was the first person to search for the naissance of the word *jindou*. According to him, a story kept in *Zhanguo ce*(《战国策》) can be taken as the possible etymological background for *jindou*.

The story took place around 458 B.C. At that time there was a small kingdom named Dai. In the neighborhood there was the kingdom of Zhao. The king of Zhao once attempted to annex the Dai's kingdom. He gave her sister's hand to the Dai's king. Later Zhao invited the happy Dai's king to a banquet, but secretly told to the cook that he should prepare a bronze ladle with a long handle. On adding more drinks for the Dai' king, the cook turned over the ladle and hit the head of Dai's king with it. Thereupon the Dai's king lost his life, and his kingdom became annexed to the kindomof Zhao. The bronze ladle with the long handle is called “金斗” sounding also *jindou*, thus believed to be the etymological ground for acrobatic *jindou*.⁸

Taking “金斗” for “筋斗” only because of the same sound and its turning function can be looked upon as an eisegesis. It is really true that Chinese idioms are based usually on stories. However it can be observed that, by coming out of a Chinese idiom, sound usually does not play a role, but the clearly expressed moral of a story gives birth to an idiom. From the above story of “金斗” (*jindou*) there is hardly any moral could be found. If we try to make a metonymy for “金斗”, the most possible substitute may be a lethal weapon.

Thus “金斗” cannot be the etymological source for *jindou* under discussion. But the proposed equivalence of “金斗” with *jindou* in the history and the actual lack of an obvious etymology for the word gives a hint for further investigation. *jindou* can be written in different forms, such as, 筋斗, 觚斗, and in the North of China, 跟头。The variety of written forms strongly suggests that it was a borrowed word from a foreign language. A Khotanese word proves that the hypothesis is built on a real ground.

In the Khotanese Rāmayaṇa we read a fighting plot between Rāma, Nanda and

⁸ <http://www.guoxue.com/shibu/战国策/0029.htm>.

Daśagrīva. According to the story they already knew the vital spot of Daśagrīva, and it develops as follows:

They spoke thus to him: ‘if you should be such a great hero, stretch out for us the big toe of your right foot.’ He stretched out his foot. Rāma shot it with an arrow. He fell with a thud to the ground. They bound him quickly at the throat. They placed two chains on him. He was then about to flying quickly into the sky. Nanda the monkey turned. He struck him down to the ground.⁹

Attention should be paid to this sentence:

hamgaistā nandā makalā.
Nanda the monkey turned.

The word *turn* is rendering Khotanese **hamggeils-*. If we translate the Khotanese sentence into Chinese, the best equivalent is “翻筋斗” for the context, and every Chinese will understand what it implies. By the way, it is interesting to observe that the Khotanese monkey Nanda seems to possess an ability, which the Chinese Monkey king is also endowed with.

**ham-ggeils-* is based on the verbal root **ggeils-* which is in MPe *gard-* and in NPe *gardīdan*. Double written *gg* in Khotanese is for the phonemic value of [g] as found out by Emmerick.¹⁰ From the phonetic viewpoint, the statement that *jindou* is a loanword based on the Iranian verb *gard-* will not be problematic, for the Indo-Iranian [g] is a well attested equivalent for ancient Chinese *j* = [kj]. However, the relationship of [r] to ancient Chinese *n* requires a further explanation. I am not an expert in Chinese phonology, but venture to make a remark. It seems that the final *n* in Chinese tends to change to *er*, — a change frequently occurring in northern dialects, for example *zhen* (針) to *zhe^{er}*, *san* (三) to *sa^{er}* in the Beijing dialect. As an older Chinese example, *jin*(斤) can be found in Khotanese as a loanword from Chinese. The spelling for the borrowed word is *kiṇa* with the retroflex *n* rendering the final *n* of *jin*(斤)¹¹.

The base verb *gard-* means to turn, and *jindou* is an equivalent for acrobatic turning, and their sounds do not conflict with each other. Before I may come to my first conclusion, I would like to make an assertion from archeological evidence: From

⁹ The English translation is from Emmerick. I received the translation from Emmerick when I was a student by him.

¹⁰ R. E. Emmerick and E. G. Pulleyblank, *A Chinese Text in Central Asian Brahmi script*. Roma, 1993, p.29.

¹¹ cf. note 9, page 54.

the tomb of the Jinxiang (金乡县) acrobatic figures are found¹² which are typical of the *Hu* flavor. It means that the *Hu* people were very familiar with acrobatic skills. In view of this I would say that *jindou* must be a loanword from an Iranian language.

Part III

However the discussion cannot end with the above conclusion, for there obviously exists an indo-European common root from which 2 lines have developed down to the present day. If the Iranian verb base *gard* is under discussion, the other line shall not be neglected for which the Sogdian *wrt-* is the representative. The ensuing group of words is taken from B. Gharib's *Sogdian Dictionary*, all referring to *turn*.

7268 **prw'rt- parwärt**, turning, turn

7035 **pr'ywrt- pariwart** (*to*)turn, (*to*)become.

7037 **pr'ywyrt- pariwärt** (*to*) turn, (*to*)transform.

7269 **prw'rt- parwart** (*to*) turn

7294 **prwrt- parwart** (*to*) turn, (*to*)return, (*to*)become, (*to*)revolve

7319 **prwyrt- parwärt** (*to*) turn, (*to*)transform, (*to*)translate

10185 **wrty(y) warte** spring(turning)

11495 **zwrt- zwart** (*to*)return, (*to*) turn, (*to*) turn away¹³

As we are already well informed through different pieces of archaeological evidence and literature, in the history, mainly people with Iranian as their mother tongue used to maintain a close relationship with the Hans. Their traces are still recognizable, and the Chinese language still keeps a faint memory of them when we say idioms in relation to *hu* like 胡言乱语, and so on. Among the Iranian people in China, Sogdians were not small in number. Sogdian villages had been established around Dunhuang. Tang poetry describes beautiful Hu-girls around Youzhou (today's Beijing) and a Hu taverns owner. Considering that *gard-* can be borrowed into Chinese, it should be reasonable to say that beside *jindou*, another Iranian loanword based on Sogdian *wrt-* might exist.

Sogdians were famous for their dances, of which different kinds have been distinguished from the viewpoint of the audience. The poet Yuanzhen wrote about Huxuan (胡旋) and Huteng (胡腾), therefore they were apparently two different dances. According to the description in literature, the performers of Huxuan were mostly female, and the outstanding peculiarity of the dance was its reeling. While the dance Huxuan was mostly performed for the royal court, Huteng on the other hand belonged with lion dances and different shows of acrobatics to the 100 most popular plays (百戏) in the Tang times, which could be presented on streets and before the

¹² 王自力、孙福喜《唐金乡县主墓》，北京文物出版社，2002年。齐东方书评《王自力、孙福喜〈唐金乡县主墓〉》，《唐研究》第九卷，北京大学出版社，2003年，第584页。

¹³ B. Gharib, *Sogdian Dictionary* (Sogdian-Persian-English), Tehran 1995.

front door of Buddhist temples during festivals and celebrations. In contrast to Huxuan, the performers of Huteng seem to be male.

By a careful reading of the poems about Huteng and Huxuan, one point becomes remarkable. It seems that in the Tang time dances were compiled not only for pleasing the royal court, but also for expressing motifs. Apparently, devised gestures of dances possessed symbolic meanings and were used to transfer feelings, like a language. It is clearly shown in the poem written by Liu Yanshi after watching with his own eyes the marvelous dance of Huteng,¹⁴ and especially in the following sentence:

“西顾忽思乡路远，跳身转毂宝带鸣。”

When he is looking to the west, suddenly he remembers that far is the way for returning home. He jumps up and turns like a wheel while his precious belt is making sounds.

The sentence “looking to the west” is apparently a description of the gesture of the dancer, and what follows is an interpretation of the gesture by the poet. Under such an interpretation the dance is meaningful, and longing for home is the motif of the dance. Taking the motif as a background, logically, gestures such as jumping up and turning like a wheel receive of course the symbolic meanings of spanning over space. There are 2 Tang poems dedicated to Huteng. In both poems we find coincidentally that longing for home is the motif.

When sensitive poets in the Tang times were watching a dance, they attempted to explain the gestures shown by the dancers, ——this habit, obviously, is also exposed in the poem of Yuan Zhen while describing a Huxuan dance. Through him the Huxuan dance receives a new interpretation. He blamed Huxuan dances for being a part of the plot of Hu rebels. In his eyes female dancers of Huxuan were reeling in order to convey a cattish meaning. Concubines and flattering officials captured the transferred symbolic meaning and began to use what they learnt from the Huxuan dance while they gave flattery and compliments to the emperor. As a result, the emperor was surrounded by flattering people and lost his judgment. Therefore, according to the poet, the Hu rebels under An Lushan could run over Changan, and the emperor had to escape. Through the way that the poet tried to give the Huxuan dance a new interpretation, the habit of a trained Tang poet for observing dances stands out and stresses the argument that gestures of a dance were used to convey a motif or meaning in the Tang times.

Evidently Huxuan and Huteng were dances performed mostly by Sogdians. The most striking character of the dances is their turning, turning like a wheel and turning like a whirlwind. If one asks about the Sogdian name for turning, a usual word based on *wrt-* is the first choice. A general observance can be added here that there is no difference between the two kinds of turning expressed by the verb base *wrt-* or *gard-*

¹⁴ 刘言史的《王中丞宅夜观舞胡腾》:

“石国胡儿人见少，蹲舞尊前急如鸟，织成蕃帽虚顶尖，细氎胡衫双袖小，手中抛下蒲萄盏，西顾忽思乡路远，跳身转毂宝带鸣，弄脚缤纷锦靴软，四座无言皆瞪目，横笛琵琶偏头促，乱腾新毯雪朱毛，傍拂轻花下红烛，酒阑舞罢丝管绝，木槿花西见残月。引自北京大学中文系《全唐诗》检索系统。”

of Middle Iranian: —— 1) Turning with a vertical axis and 2) Turning with a horizontal axis. For both kinds of turning *wrt-* or *gard-* can be used. We find examples as *wād ī girdag* “whirlwind” in Pahlavi, *gerd-āp* “vortex” in New Persian for turning around a vertical axis, and *wrtn* in Sogdian which means a cart —— a word built from base *wrt-*. The last one shows a possibility of the base *wrt-* being used for turning around a horizontal axis.

But in the Chinese language turnings with vertical and horizontal axes are distinguished. For turning with a vertical axis there is an adequate word *xuan* (旋), but *xuan* has never been used for turnings with a horizontal axis, for which ancient Chinese preferred descriptive idioms such as 转毂、轮迴 (turning like a wheel). Here the reason can also be explained why the Chinese language had to borrow a special word for a kind of horizontal turning, namely *jindou*. *Jindou* = an Iranian word from the base *gard-*, meaning “to turn”.

Keeping the different ways of expression between Chinese and Iranian languages in mind, it is then imaginable that we find two kinds of translation for one base word *wrt-*. As stated above, the main peculiarity of Huxuan is its reeling, reeling like a whirlwind. However fast and much the dancer might reel, the reeling could still be conveyed with only one Chinese word, namely *xuan* (旋). Therefore people need not otherwise to borrow a word in order to give the dance a name. Huxuan, meaning reeling of Hu, is the best adequate name for the dance. As for Huteng, we have a different figure. As we read above in the poems about Huteng, the dancer did not only reel while dancing, he also jumped high and turned like a wheel. Gestures of Huteng were beyond the sphere of the concept of *xuan* (旋), and the simplest way to give a name to the dance was to borrow from the original language, in this case from Sogdian. Therefore Huteng seems to me to be a borrowed word, —— a transliteration of an original Sogdian word based on *wrt-*.

From the phonetic viewpoint, the allegation that Huteng might be a borrowed word from Sogdian does not seem to be problematic. The Sogdian base *wrt-* is etymologically identical with Sanskrit \sqrt{vrt} . Sogdian-Chinese words are rarely found, but there are some Sanskrit words with initial *v* which had been rendered into characters with initial *xh* as in 和、憩、洹、桓、会.¹⁵ For a real Sogdian-Chinese example, one case is found in a translated text by Bukong (不空) in which it is recorded that according to *Hus* (Sogdians) the planet Jupiter(木曜) is called *Huwu* (鹞勿). *Huwu* is in fact a equivalent for Sogdian *wrmsht*.¹⁶

To sum up, *jindou* is a word obviously borrowed from a Middle Iranian word based on *gard-*. But as a term for a skill in acrobatics, the word does not have any symbolic meaning. The same skill was also performed in Huteng dances of Sogdians during the Tang times. As gestures of their dances, jumping up and turning like wheel,

¹⁵ The words has been found mainly in texts translated by Dharmarakṣa (A.D.266-313, 竺法护). 刘广和《西晋译经对音的晋语声母系统》，载于刘广和著《音韵比较研究》，中国广播电视出版社，2002年，第179、184页。

¹⁶ 《文殊师利菩萨及诸仙所说吉凶时日善而宿曜经》《大正藏》第21卷，第398页，下栏。 *wrmsht* is Khotanese *urmaysde* and Persian *ohrmazd*.

— the same movement of *jindou*, is endowed with symbolic meaning as we may find out from the Tang poems. At the last stage, we find a combination of a borrowed word and a borrowed connotation. The combination is already made perfect by Puhua, the monk of a Dhyāna Buddhist monastery in the international environment of Youzhou. Due to the tradition (of the of Dhyāna Buddhist school in China) of adopting gestures for teaching, *jindou* succeeded in developing its perfect meaning to an extreme of exaggeration as shown in the novel *A Journey to the West*. Today while we are laughing about the Monkey King on the stage of Peking Opera and on TV, who can imagine that the soul of the Sogdian dancer is still alive?