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Additional Notes and Commentary on *maskee* in Chinese Pidgin English

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I read with great interest Karl J. Franklin's recent article (and subsequent update) on the etymology of *maski* in Tok Pisin, in which Franklin traces *maski* back to the Chinese Pidgin English (CPE) *maskee* and references late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century works by Leland (1876), Hunter (1882), and Dalgado (1913) to suggest a Portuguese origin of the term (Franklin, *Language and Linguistics in Melanesia*, Vol. 33/1, 2015). While I claim no expertise in the topic of Tok Pisin, my research on the socioeconomic history of early Sino-Western relations has afforded me a degree of familiarity with early written sources on CPE, and I believe that these sources can help fill in some of the gaps of the secondhand or post facto accounts of Leland,¹ Hunter, Dalgado, and others. I wish to draw readers' attention to one such source—an 1830s phrasebook that Chinese used to learn CPE—that both offers further evidence for a Portuguese etymology and opens up new avenues for research on potential interrelationships among Portuguese, CPE, Tok Pisin, and other Western Pacific pidgins.

In his discussion, Franklin cites longtime Canton resident William C. Hunter's mention of a pamphlet called "Devils' Talk," which local Chinese used to learn CPE (Hunter, p. 63-64). Franklin laments that "unfortunately, there are no such pamphlets known to be in existence" (Franklin, p. 7), but I am happy to report this is not in fact the case. Several different versions of Hunter's "Devils' Talk" have survived; I know of three CPE glossaries dating from circa 1835 that match Hunter's description (and I welcome readers to bring to my attention any others that I may have missed):

- *Hongmao tongyong fanhua* "Commonly Used Foreign Language of the Red-haired People," *Bijingtang* edition (British Library)
- *Hongmao tongyong fanhua*, *Chengdetang* edition (British Library)
- *Hongmao maimai tongyong guihua* "Devils' Speech of the Red-haired People Commonly Used in Business," *Rongdetang* edition (Bibliothèque nationale de France)

Given its title, the *Hongmao maimai tongyong guihua* is the most likely candidate for Hunter's "Devils' Talk," but the overall differences among these versions are relatively minor. All three have the same cover of the foreigner and his "three-cornered hat, coat with wide skirts, breeches..., long stockings, shoes with buckles, lace sleeves, and...cane" (Hunter, p. 63), and all three contain similar content, with close to 400 terms concerning various matters of trade and daily life.² (For reference, Kingsley Bolton's *Chinese Englishes* (2003) contains a full scan of the

¹ I have particular reservations about the use of Leland as a reliable source on CPE, given both the overtly racist tones of his *Pidgin-English sing-song* and the fact that Leland himself never visited China. Moreover, considering that CPE evolved considerably from the time of its development during the trade with Canton to its diffusion to and adaptation in other cities after the first Opium War (1839-1842), it seems more prudent to look to earlier texts for clues about Portuguese influence.

² For additional firsthand references to and details on these texts, see Samuel W. Williams's 1836 and 1837 articles in *The Chinese Repository*: Vol. IV, No. 9 (Jan. 1836), 428-435; Vol. 6, No. 6 (Oct. 1837), 276-279.

British Library's *Bijingtang* edition, along with a useful transcription and translation of its contents. Chapter 3 of Bolton's text also contains an excellent overview of early CPE and is worth reading for anyone interested in the subject.)³

For the purposes of understanding the early etymology of *maskee* in CPE, the key term in the *Hongmao* texts is 係都好 (with a meaning roughly equivalent to 'it's all good'), listed in the 'Everyday Language' sub-section (p. 7b). Written beneath the term are the characters designated to capture its pronunciation in Cantonese: 孖士基 *māasigēi* (i.e., *maskee*, < Port. *mas que* 'even though,' concessive 'fine, never mind' in the Macanese context).⁴ In the case of *māasigēi*'s occurrence in "Devils' Talk," the Portuguese origins of the term seem clear not only from the similar meaning and phonology, but also from the presence of several other apparently Portuguese-derived terms that appear on the same page:

沙鼻 *sāabeih* (< Port. *saber* 'to know') to represent 曉得 'know/understand'
 哪沙鼻 *náhsābeih* (< Port. *não saber* 'to not know') to represent 唔曉 'not know/understand'
 法地里 *faatdeihléih* (< Port. *feitoria* 'trading post') to represent 行 'business'

Various other Portuguese-influenced terms are discernible in the manual; see Appendix 4 in Bolton for further transcriptions and a full listing of CPE terms of Portuguese, Swedish, and Malay origin.

On top of these linguistic similarities, the cover images of the texts also reflect Portuguese influences. The engraving is not of just any foreigner, but specifically of a Portuguese nobleman. It seems to have been copied from an engraving that appeared nearly a century earlier in the *Aomen jilve* "Monograph of Macau" (1751), which two lower-level Mandarin officials had compiled to describe the affairs of the Portuguese colony. In fact, the same picture appeared again in another specifically Chinese Pidgin Portuguese phrasebook titled *Aomen fanyu zazi quanben* "Compendium of Assorted Terms in the Macau Foreign Language" in the early nineteenth century. (See Figure 1 and Figure 2. Unfortunately, only part of the Portuguese phrasebook has survived, so a full comparison with the CPE texts is not possible; I could not find 孖士基 *māasigēi* in the extant portion.)

These primary materials all further point to a Portuguese origin of CPE *maskee*. At the same time, they also raise questions about other possible interrelationships among Portuguese, CPE, and other pidgin languages. The rich social, linguistic, and economic interlinkages of the South Asian and Western Pacific oceans deserve further investigation by scholars across the social sciences and humanities, and it is my hope that by raising awareness of some of the historical sources that are becoming increasingly available to researchers, we can make joint progress in investigating these questions further.

³ Other relevant recent scholarship on the subject includes Ansaldo et al. (2012), Ansaldo (2009), and Matthews and Li (2013, 2012). On the historical circumstances of the trading environment in which CPE developed, van Dyke (2011, 2005) provides the most comprehensive overview; see bibliography.

⁴ For a detailed discussion of the term, see Veiga and Fernández (2012).

Figure 1



Aomen jilve (1751) engraving

Figure 2



Cover of *Aomen fanyu* (ca. 1830)
Source: Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin -
Preußischer Kulturbesitz

(The CPE *Hongmao* texts appropriate this same picture of a Portuguese nobleman for their covers, but those images cannot be reproduced here for copyright reasons. For an example, refer to Bolton, p. 171.)

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Professor Karl Franklin's Response to Commentary

Carl E. Kubler obviously has better resources on early CPE than I do and his observations and comments are well taken.

However, I don't know that it is fair to imply that Leland's materials are of questionable value because he never visited China (although I didn't know that). He submitted his materials to at least one fluent CPE speaker for comments and editing, as well as to two Chinese scholars. He also was a scholar himself, from what I have seen. For example, and according to the 1897 edition of *Pidgin-English Sing-song on Songs and Stories in The China-English Dialect*, he wrote *Breitmann Ballads*; *Gaudeamus* (humorous poems from the German of Joseph Victor Scheffel and others); *English Gypsies and their language*; *Fu-Sang, or, The Discovery of America by Chinese Buddhist Priests in the Fifth Century*; and *The Gypsies*.

What Leland hoped for was that "this little book will perhaps be useful, as qualifying them [visitors] to converse in Pidgin" (p. 8). He was obviously ingenuous in suggesting that CPE was similar to "negro minstrelsy or baby talk", but I am not sure that this was "racist" (a very loaded term in our U.S. society). He was certainly paternalistic, but there were not many foreigners of his day who were not--and the trend continues!

Karl Franklin
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