

Comparison of Pronunciation in Ancient Chinese, Modern Cantonese and Modern Mandarin, with Japanese Examples

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This comparison was inspired by my coming across some passages in the writing of the Swedish sinologist Bernhard Karlgren (高本漢) called *Grammata Serica: Script and Phonetics in Chinese and Sino-Japanese* (中日漢字形聲論).¹ The characters in Ancient Chinese – now usually called Middle Chinese – listed on pages 50-63 of that publication have romanised pronunciation which is surprisingly similar to modern Cantonese, my mother tongue or first language. This Ancient Chinese, according to Karlgren, is “the language spoken in Ch’ang-an, the capital, in Sui and early T’ang time (6th and early 7th c. A. D.). This language, the s.-c. Ancient Chinese, [is] most fully represented by the dictionary Ts’ie yün [*Qie yun*, 切韻] (published in 601 A.D.)”

Without any linguistics training but with an interest in comparing languages which I can handle to a greater or lesser extent – namely Chinese, English and Japanese – I compiled this comparison of Ancient Chinese, modern Cantonese and modern Mandarin (a.k.a. Putonghua), with additional examples in Japanese. The characters in the following table are from the lists of Ancient Chinese in Karlgren’s work, with diacritics shown for their romanised forms. However, for the Cantonese, Mandarin and Japanese transliteration, neither tone marks nor diacritics are given here.

As displayed in Group A, Cantonese has retained many of the initial K or G consonant sound found in Ancient Chinese. Japanese also does so. In modern Mandarin, the original K or G initial consonant has become the “softer” J or Q (pronounced similar to “ch” as in “child”).

Characters in Group B are those with a concluding M sound in Ancient Chinese and modern Cantonese, a distinctive feature of Cantonese pronunciation which is not found in modern Mandarin or Japanese. In either Mandarin or Japanese, the concluding M has been replaced by the N ending consonant. This ending M sound in Cantonese, such as in the characters “*sum*” (for 心, meaning heart) and “*gum*” (for 金, meaning gold) might help soften the otherwise hard and harsh feel of Cantonese for many non-Cantonese speakers.

One of the four main tones of Chinese characters, the “entering tone” or “checked tone”, is shared by Ancient Chinese and modern Cantonese, but “has been lost without any trace” or “has dropped” (Karlgren’s words) in modern Mandarin. This tone, represented by the ending P, T or K sound, is also retained in Japanese but rendered into a syllable such as “*u*”, “*tsu*”, “*ku*” or “*ki*”. This tone is designated as “entering” since its Chinese name 入, meaning “to enter”, is pronounced with the ending P sound, as demonstrated in the Cantonese sound “*yap*” or “*yup*”. Characters in Group C are examples.

Character	Ancient Chinese (Sui & early Tang, 6 th -7 th century, from Karlgren, based on <i>Qie yun</i> 切韻)	Modern Cantonese (Tsoi's transliteration ²)	Modern Mandarin (a.k.a. Putonghua) (pinyin)	Japanese Examples (kan'on 漢音, adopted as official during Tang dynasty ³)
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Group A. The Initial K or G

The initial consonant K or G in Ancient Chinese is maintained, or found, in modern Cantonese, whereas in modern Mandarin it has become either J or Q (pronounced similar to “ch” as in “child”). In Japanese according to the kan'on reading, the K consonant applies throughout these examples.

吉	k _i ət	gat	ji	kitsu (きつ)
曲	k'iwok	kuk	qu	kyoku (きょく)
君	kiuən	gwan	jun	kun (くん)
佳	kai	gaai	jia	kai (かい)
家	ka	ga	jia	ka (か)
俱	kiu	kui	ju	ku (く)
蕨	kiwet	kuet	jue	ketsu (けつ)
權	g'iwän	kuen	quan	ken (けん)

Group B. The Ending M

Modern Cantonese has a feature that is identical with Ancient Chinese but not found in modern Mandarin. This is the characteristic ending M consonant. There is but one exception as shown in Karlgren's examples, which is the character 品*. In Cantonese, this character is pronounced with a N ending, instead of the ancient M.

In Japanese, this ending M is replaced by the ending N, same as in Mandarin.

The ending M is also found in Korean, as evident in the common family name 金 that is read as Kim (“Gum” in Cantonese and “Jin” in Mandarin).

心	s _i əm	sum	xin	shin (しん)
今	kiəm	gum	jin	kin (きん)
甘	kâm	gum	gan	kan (かん)

Character	Ancient Chinese	Modern Cantonese	Modern Mandarin	Japanese Examples
占	t̚s̚jäm	jim	zhan	sen (せん)
衫	ʃam	sham	shan	san (さん)
品*	p'jäm	bun*	pin	hin (ひん)
針	t̚s̚jäm	jam	zhen	shin (しん)
感	käm	gum	gan	kan (かん)
廉	ljäm	lim	lian	ren (れん)
<p>Group C-1. The “Entering Tone” or “Checked Tone” (入聲): the Ending P</p> <p>Ancient Chinese has four tones, the fourth one being the “entering tone” or “checked tone”. When transcribed in English, this tone is represented by the ending P, ending T or ending K sound. English examples are “cup”, “but” and “luck”, all of which have an ending equivalent to the Chinese checked tone. In Cantonese, this checked tone is quite common, as shown in the examples below. There is no checked tone in modern Mandarin. In Japanese, which has adopted Chinese characters for some 1,600 years,⁴ this checked tone is the only tone, of the original four tones, which has been maintained in its kanji pronunciation. For example, the ending P in kanji has been rendered nowadays as “<i>u</i>” (う).</p>				
立	ljəp	lap	li	ryū (りゅう)
甲	kap	gaap	jia	kō (こう)
協	yiep	hip	xie	kyō (きょう)
帖	t'iep	tip	tie	chō (ちょう)
接	tsjāp	jip	jie	shō (しょう)
答	tāp	daap	da	tō (とう)
葉	jāp	yip	ye	yō (よう)
鴿	kāp	gaap	ge	kō (こう)

Character	Ancient Chinese	Modern Cantonese	Modern Mandarin	Japanese Examples
<p>Group C-2. The “Entering Tone” or “Checked Tone” (入聲): the Ending T Cantonese keeps the checked tone T found in Ancient Chinese. In Japanese, this tone is represented by the syllable “<i>tsu</i>”.</p>				
八 出 必 悅 雪 發 結 達 傑	pwat t́s'iuēt p̄iēt īwät sīwät p̄iwet kiet d'ât g'jät	baat chut bit yuet suet fat kit daat kit	ba chu bi yue xue fa jie da jie	hatsu (はつ) shutsu (しゅつ) hitsu (ひつ) etsu (えつ) setsu (せつ) hatsu (はつ) ketsu (けつ) tatsu (たつ) ketsu (けつ)
<p>Group C-3. The “Entering Tone” or “Checked Tone” (入聲): the Ending K Cantonese keeps the checked tone K found in Ancient Chinese. In Japanese, this tone is represented by either the syllable “<i>ku</i>” or the syllable “<i>ki</i>”.</p>				
力 北 百 昔 祝 益 域 得 菊	l̄ək pək pək sjäk t́siuk j̄äk j̄iwək tək k̄juk	lik bak baak sik juk yik wik dak guk	li bei bai xi zhu yi yu de ju	ryoku (りよく) hoku (ほく) haku (はく) seki (せき) shuku (しゅく) eki (えき) yoku (よく) toku (とく) kiku (きく)

Character	Ancient Chinese	Modern Cantonese	Modern Mandarin	Japanese Examples
碧	piäk	bik	bi	heki (へき)

I am not in a position to discuss the development of, or the relationship between, Ancient Chinese and modern Cantonese over the past 1,400 years since the appearance of *Qie yun* (切韻). These two forms of Chinese pronunciation are separated by the vast distance across north and south China too. However, between the two forms there exists a similarity in some prominent features, as exemplified by the characters above. A Japanese author labels Japanese kanji (漢字) as a fossil of Middle Chinese (中古漢語, *chūko kangō*) since kanji retains some main pronunciation features of Middle Chinese (that is Ancient Chinese according to Karlgren).⁵ Perhaps Cantonese may be labelled as a living fossil of Ancient Chinese (dated the 6th and the 7th century) as well.

Notes

¹Bernhard Karlgren, *Grammata Serica: Script and Phonetics in Chinese and Sino-Japanese* (中日漢字形聲論) (Stockholm: The Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, 1940; repr., Beijing, 1941). Reprinted from *The Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities*, no. 12.

²Romanisation of Cantonese pronunciation follows the scheme used in the Cantonese index on p. 546-575 in Cai Jiannan Zhong wen dian nao zhong xin 蔡劍南中文電腦中心, *Quan tu chuan yi Cang Jie ma zi dian* (*An Illustrated Dictionary for Changjie Code*) 全圖傳意倉頡碼字典. (Xianggang: Wan li shu dian, 1998).

³These kan'on readings (漢音) are from Shinchōsha 新潮社, *Shinchō Nihongo kanji jiten* 新潮日本語漢字辭典 (Tōkyō: Shinchōsha, 2007). Kan'on readings of Chinese characters were brought to Japan by its students, scholars and Buddhist monks who were sent to Chang'an (長安), the national capital of China, as members of the notable Japanese envoys during the Sui and Tang dynasties (遣隋使 *kenzuisshi*, 遣唐使 *kentōshi*). Prior to these efforts between the 7th and the 9th century, readings of Chinese characters are called go'on (吳音) which came to Japan mainly via the Korean peninsula before the 7th century. Although kan'on was regarded as official at the time, nowadays the kan'on and go'on schemes coexist.

⁴Okimori Takuya 沖森卓也, *Nihon no kanji: 1600-nen no rekishi* 日本の漢字: 1600年の歴史 (Tōkyō: Bere Shuppan, 2011).

⁵Takashima Toshio 高島俊男, *Kanji to Nihonjin* 漢字と日本人 (Tōkyō: Bungei Shunjū, 2001), 48.

[Return to Homepage](#)