



Cardamoms, and a new etymology for Chinese 豆蔻 *dòukòu* ‘cardamom; nutmeg’

 Gábor Parti¹ and  Ian Joo²

^{1,2}The Hong Kong Polytechnic University

²Nagoya University of Commerce and Business

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Abstract

This paper aims to provide a new etymological explanation for the Chinese word 豆蔻 *dòukòu* ‘cardamom; nutmeg’ and explores the potential trade-language origins of the term. We propose that this word is a loanword that may have entered the Chinese lexicon via Southern Min, originating from an Indian Ocean trade-language used on the ancient Maritime Silk Road during the Tang era (618–907). Our findings suggests that this word entered the Chinese lexicon alongside the economic products it denotes, and underwent phono-semantic matching that obscures its foreign origins. We present our reasoning in four main points, detailing our observations regarding 1) the earliest written records, 2) character composition, 3) available lexicographical data, and 4) an overview of seemingly related regional *Wanderwörter* (wandering loanwords) as evidence supporting our hypothesis. After elucidating the lexicogenesis of this word, we discuss the linguistic and historical plausibility of our claims, and explore potential candidate etymons, such as Prakrit and Arabic.

Keywords — Cardamom, 豆蔻, Etymology, Trade-language, Chinese, Southern Min, Indian Ocean, Spice Trade

1 Introduction

Cardamom is a popular spice with a history spanning thousands of years of culinary and medicinal use; the reader might recall the vibrant aroma of the green seed-pods. Less well-known is the fact however, that the name *cardamom* can refer to multiple different kinds of fragrant fruits, besides the familiar pods of the “true cardamom”, *Elettaria cardamomum*. Furthermore, delving deeper into the identities of cardamoms from an Asian perspective reveals a complex array of words and materials, prototypical cardamoms are botanically distinct species found in various regions (e.g., Eastern Himalayas, Indochina, Java, Yunnan), and their names and identities have become somewhat entangled along the paths of diffusion.

In the present study, we examine the situation in Chinese, where the corresponding word is 豆蔻 *dòukòu*, also pointing towards an unrelated spice, nutmeg...

The paper also aims to clarify the situation surrounding the multitude of cardamoms in Asia, focusing on the identities and terminologies in a Chinese context, as the word *dòukòu*, too, is ambiguous and can refer to several different aromatic fruits and seeds.

Setting the scene for our etymological investigation, we first provide some answers on what cardamom is, and why is it a question in the first place.

1.1 What is cardamom?

What people mean by the name *cardamom* depends on who we ask, where we are, and in what language we are operating – for the word *cardamom* and its translations can denote multiple different spices. In all cases, this name will refer to an aromatic plant yielding a culinary and medicinal spice, and in all likelihood, most readers will likely think of the dried fruits of *Elettaria cardamomum*¹, which can be seen in Figure 1.

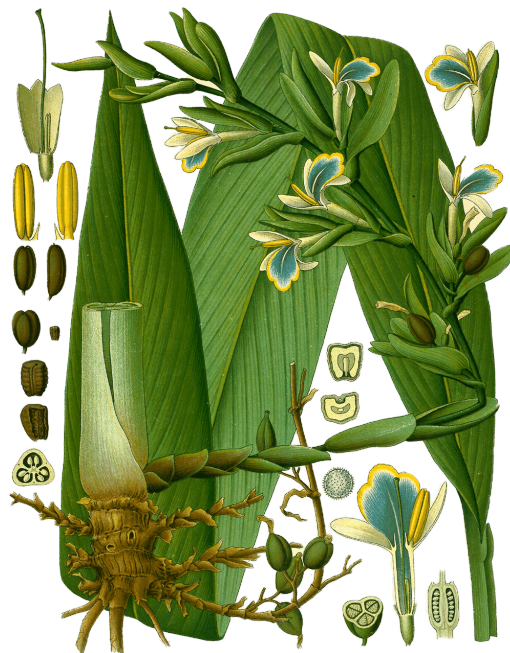


Figure 1: *Elettaria cardamomum* in Köhler (1887, vol. 2, p. 186)’s *Medizinal Pflanzen*

In Europe, the Middle East, India, and many other parts of the world, *cardamom* typically refers to the seed pods of *Elettaria cardamomum* (L.) Maton, which is an aromatic flowering plant in the ginger family (*Zingiberaceae*). It is native to India’s Western Ghats, the mountain range stretching above the Malabar coast. This is the same region where black pepper hails from, and in an Indian context they are often called “the king and queen of spices” (Nair, 2020) – cardamom being the queen.

It is a well known culinary spice with a long history, also used in the infusion of beverages, and perfumery (e.g., Indian cuisine; Arabian coffee). Cardamom was in

¹*Elettaria cardamomum* in Plants of the World Online (POWO, 2022): <https://powo.science.kew.org/taxon/796556-1>

India was in use in India since the Vedic period ??, and it was traded to and through Mesopotamia since the bronze age (Parry, 1969; Ravindran & Madhusoodanan, 2002).

In Europe it was known since antiquity and used as medicine; Greek historians and physicians documented its healing properties, sometimes even correctly identifying that it comes from India. Theophrastus, Dioscorides, Pliny (Anderson, 2023)

Today it is still valuable, it is the 3rd most expensive spice after saffron and vanilla. It is also known as *green cardamom* and *true cardamom*.

1.2 False cardamoms

The name *true cardamom* implies the existence of “false” ones, which is not so odd when it comes to spice nomenclature; the term *false* is typically used to designate alternative economic products (cf. *true cinnamon* vs. *bastard cinnamon*), or hints towards practices of adulteration (cf. *false saffron*). In our case, the former is true: there are at least a dozen other spice-bearing aromatic plants in the ginger family referred to as cardamoms, native to Asia and Africa, **previously** all placed in the genera *Amomum* (Southeast Asia) and *Aframomum* (Africa).

These plants and their fruits are called *cardamoms* as well because of their physical, chemical, and functional similarity to a prototype spice – green cardamom in a western context – especially one distinct common feature: they are all aromatic seed-pods containing small seeds.

To make it clear, no one in Asia thinks these cardamoms are fake, what is considered “false” is determined by the reigning prototype spice in the given culture (whether it grows there, or it’s the first of its kind they have encountered), and the perceived value of the spice (so called true cinnamon from Ceylon was and is considered superior to cassia or Chinese cinnamon, warranting names such as bastard cinnamon).

Wait a minute, true cardamom? Are there false cardamoms? Well, yes! The name “true cardamom” implies the existence of “false” ones, at least in an English context. This is not that strange when it comes to spice names and it hints on the availability of alternative products, or to practices of adulteration. In fact, there are at least a dozen other plants in the ginger family to which the botanical and culinary literature refer to as cardamoms, native to Asia and Africa in the genera *Amomum* and *Aframomum*. So, why are these other spices called cardamoms as well? Because of their physical, chemical, and functional similarity, but especially one distinct feature: they are all aromatic seed-pods containing small seeds. By the way, no one in Asia thinks these cardamoms are fake, what is considered “false” is determined by the reigning prototype spice in the given culture (whether it grows there, or it’s the first of its kind they have encountered), and the perceived value of the spice (so called true cinnamon from Ceylon was and is considered superior to cassia or Chinese cinnamon, warranting names such as bastard cinnamon).

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So, while for many of us cardamom looks like this,

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Some other prototype cardamoms of Asia

There are places where the “default”, prototype cardamom looks and tastes a bit different. In Northern India, Nepal, Bhutan, Bengal, there is black cardamom, or greater cardamom – you can see it on the left; in Yunnan, Southwestern China there is the

even larger tsaoko cardamom, or Chinese black cardamom; and Thailand, Cambodia and Indonesia have two species that yield little round white cardamoms.

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Some common names in English

amomum, bastard cardamom, bastard Siamese cardamom, Bengal cardamom, big cardamom, black cardamom, brown cardamom, Cameroon cardamom, Chinese black cardamom, Chinese cardamom, Ethiopian cardamom, fake cardamom, false cardamom, greater cardamom, green cardamom, Guinea cardamom, hill cardamom, Indian black cardamom, Indian cardamom, Indonesian cardamom, Java cardamom, Java round cardamom, Java white cardamom, kepulaga, korarima, krervanh, large cardamom, Madagascar cardamom, Malabar cardamom, Nepal cardamom, round cardamom, round Chinese cardamom, Siam cardamom, Tavoy cardamom, Thai cardamom, true cardamom, tsao-ko cardamom, wild Siamese cardamom, winged cardamom, Yunnan cardamom...

Selected sources: Dalby (2000); Prance & Nesbitt (2005); van Wyk (2014); Hill (2017); Anderson (2023), etc.

All of these have a bunch of other vernacular names in English, usually named after the green cardamom as the prototype spice, modified with an adjective of color, a place of origin, or both; occasionally using a native name.

I have collected these names from the botanical literature, books on the history of spices and so on. You don't have to read these, I just wanted to show you how cardamom is used as a prototype word in the generation of names for novel spices.

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All the relevant spice bearing plants...

Alpinia galanga (L.) Willd. *Alpinia globose* (Lour.) Horan. syn. *Amomum globosum* Lour. *Alpinia hainanensis* K.Schum. syn. *Alpinia katsumadai* Hayata *Amomum maximum* Roxb. *Amomum subulatum* Roxb. *Elettaria cardamomum* (L.) Maton syn. *Amomum cardamomum* L. *Hornstedtia costata* (Roxb.) K.Schum. syn. *Amomum costatum* (Roxb.) Benth. ex Baker Lanxangia tsao-ko (Crevost & Lemarié) M.F.Newman & Skornick. syn. *Amomum hongtsaoko* Liang et Fang; *A. tsao-ko* Crevost et Lemaire *Wurfbainia aromatica* (Roxb.) Škorničk. & A.D.Poulsen syn. *Amomum aromaticum* Roxb. *Wurfbainia compacta* (Sol. ex Maton) Škorničk. & A.D.Poulsen syn. *Amomum compactum* Sol. ex Maton; *Amomum kepulaga* Sprague & Burkill *Wurfbainia vera* (Blackw.) Škorničk. & A.D.Poulsen syn. *Amomum krervanh* Pierre & Gagnep.; *Amomum kravanh* Pierre ex Gagnep. *Wurfbainia villosa* (Lour.) Škorničk. & A.D.Poulsen syn. *Amomum villosum* Lour. *Aframomum melegueta* K.Schum. *Aframomum grana-paradisi* (L.) K.Schum. *Aframomum cereum* (Hook.f.) K.Schum. syn. *Aframomum sceptrum* (Oliv. & D.Hanb.) K.Schum. *Aframomum exscapum* (Sims) Hepper *Aframomum alboviolaceum* (Ridl.) K.Schum. syn. *Aframomum macrospermum* (Sm.) Burkill *Aframomum angustifolium* (Sonn.) K.Schum. *Aframomum corrorima* (A.Braun) P.C.M.Jansen syn. *Amomum korarima* J.Pereira *Aframomum daniellii* (Hook.f.) K.Schum. syn. *Aframomum hanburyi* K.Schum.

Now, the whole range of plants from the cardamom-group is long and unnecessary, but now we have a question: Which one is doukou?

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Well, the answer is: a few of these, and more. In a Chinese context we have our not so well-known green cardamom, black cardamom from the Himalayas, the two white cardamoms from Southeast Asia, some semi-exotic ones that look like tiny brains, and

the reddish fruits of galangal.

Alpinia galanga (L.) Willd. *Alpinia hainanensis* K.Schum. *Amomum subulatum* Roxb. *Elettaria cardamomum* (L.) Maton *Wurfbainia compacta* (Sol. ex Maton) Škorničk. & A.D.Poulsen *Wurfbainia vera* (Blackw.) Škorničk. & A.D.Poulsen

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X cardamom = X 薑 x dòukòu

Here is a table showing the same plant products with their Chinese names; consider the examples: red-cardamom, fragrant-cardamom, little-cardamom, white-cardamom, and so on. You can see that Chinese doukou corresponds to cardamom; at least on a pragmatic level if not botanically. Dòukòu is a generic term and Chinese too also adds additional modifiers of color, place, or some other feature, with many-many dialectal variations that are out of scope for now, but basically we have a formula. As bonus, we also have nutmeg, which is called ròudòukòu (flesh cardamom) in Chinese.

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Nutmeg

It is a seed of a tree of an unrelated species from a different family, native to the Maluku islands of Indonesia, famously called the Spice Islands in colonial times, and until the 18th century it only grew here. It was one of the most prized products of the spice trade, for half a kilo you could buy a house in London.

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Origins

Map

South & Southeast Asia Biodiversity hotspot Maritime Silk Road

By the way, these aromatic plants come from this region surrounding Mainland Southeast Asia, which is a biodiversity superhotspot, with many stops along the Maritime Silk Road.

2 Etymological breadcrumbs

Scholars have a relatively good understanding of the etymology of the English word *cardamom*, which is usually reconstructed along the following lines:

English *cardamom* ‘cardamom’ ca. 1425, via **post-classical Latin** *cardimomum*, a. 1398 < later also from **Old French** *cardemome* ‘cardamom’, ca. 1170; cf. modern French *cardamome* < **Latin** *cardamōmum* ‘cardamom’, 1st c. AD < **Hellenistic Greek** καρδάμωμον *kardāmōmon* ‘cardamom’, haplological κάρδαμ- *kárdam-* ‘cress’ + ἄμωμον *āmōmon* ‘an Indian spice plant’, 3rd c. BC < **Ancient Greek** κάρδαμον *kárdamon* ‘garden cress, *Lepidium sativum*’, perhaps a loanword (many plant names with *-amon* are clear loanwords; the suffix *-amon* is known from Pre-Greek), ultimately of uncertain origin, 4th c. BC; cf. cognates classical Latin *cardamum* (OUP, [n.d.](#), s.v. *cardamom*; TLFi, [2012](#), s.v. *cardamome*; Lewis & Short, [1879](#), s.v. *cardamomum*; Liddell & Scott, [1843/1940](#), s.v. καρδάμωμον; Liddell & Scott, [1843/1940](#), s.v. κάρδαμον; Beekes & Beek, [2010](#), p. 644)

Kárdamon was identified with the word 𐀓𐀭𐀕𐀭 ka-da-mi-ja 41, (*kardamia* as a feminine form of *kardamon*) appearing on Mycenaean tablets listing spices in Linear B, excavated

in the “House of the Sphinxes” in 1950s, and dated to the 1200s bc (Bennett et al., 1958, p. 107).

this is how linguists usually reconstruct word histories: tracing word stages step by step. Basically cardamom came via Old French and Latin from a Greek word. I said kinda, because the exact origins are uncertain. And may or may not appear on Mycenaean stone tablets written in Linear B over 3000 years ago, it is outside of my specialty to judge these claims. It is quite difficult to be sure about the source of a word at this time-depth, almost 3000 years ago.

What about the etymology of *doukou*? Well, we had some suspicions, and during our investigations we came across various pieces of evidence that led us believe that *doukou* is a loanword. I will now introduce our observations and reasons why we think so in 4 points.

2.1 First mentions, first confusions

The first recorded mention of 豆蔻 *dòukòu* is from a 9th-century book called 酉陽雜俎 *Youyang Zazu* [*Miscellaneous Morsels from Youyang*], which is a Tang era miscellany of tall tales and legends, strange phenomena, fantastic creatures, and exotic products – but also an excellent source of historical data. It was collated by Duan Chengsi (d. 863), and in “chapter” (juan (scroll, or book)) 18 he discusses 24 foreign plants, which have been imported to China or have been brought as tribute from faraway places, such as Magadha (in India), Malaysia, Persia, Silla (Korea), and Syria, often reporting the local names for the non-native plants and products, and usually compares them to something more familiar to his readership. We can find descriptions of acacia, Balm of Giliad, galbanum, jackfruit, jasmine, and Narcissus, among others (Reed, 2003). Section 55 tells us about cardamom, the text is accessible via the Chinese Text Project² (Sturgeon, 2021), the translation is from us.

白豆蔻，出伽古羅國，呼為多骨。
形如芭蕉，葉似杜若，長八九尺，冬夏不凋。
花淺黃色，子作朵如蒲萄。其子初出微青，熟則變白，七月採。

White cardamom, comes from the country of *Kakula*, called /tɑ-kuət/. [...]

(YYZZ §18:55)

After stating the place of origin and its name, the author then proceeds to describe the plant’s morphology: its height, its leaves, its yellow flowers, compares the shape of the fruits to grapes (also a foreign plant in China), and puts the time of harvest to the seventh month of the lunar calendar.

...Middle Chinese reconstructions

The first obvious question here is: Why is it “white” cardamom? Or to put it more precisely, why does cardamom already have a modifier when it is the first attested instance we have of this word? According to Donkin (2003, p. 22), the Chinese first confused nutmeg and cardamom, “doubtless on account of a resemblance between their fruits”. We also know, that in the earliest sources, both spices were referred to as *dòukòu*

²<https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=en&chapter=801324>

(hsu_1967_notesDonkin, 2003), and that both were sourced from mainland Southeast Asia, and carried up to the Tang courts on ships from Kakola (Schafer, 1985, pp. 184–185). This place also appears in Ibn Battuta (dunn_1986_adventures)

To avoid nomenclatural confusion, nutmeg became 豆蔻 roudòukòu, cardamom became 白豆蔻 báidòukòu. This mix-up exists in other languages as well!

According to Donkin, the Chinese first confused nutmeg with cardamom, on account of their similar fruits, and at some point both imported spices were called doukou. Furthermore, both were sourced from mainland Southeast Asia, likely traded on the same trade routes, and the same ships, ((He says that, nutmeg was known in Chinese as kakola (ca. 725), and later as doukou (ca. 863), roudoukou is the name in later sources, including an illustrated herbal of 1062 (1249).)) So, to avoid confusion nutmeg became roudoukou – flesh cardamom – while the round cardamoms became baidoukou – white cardamom. As many scholars noticed before, the confusion is not limited to Chinese.

((Nutmeg: “chia-kou-le” (ca. 725), as “to-ku” (ca. 863). “jou-tou-k’ou” (ca. 1062) White cardamom: “tou-k’ou”, “pai-tou-k’ou” (Hsü, 1967; Donkin, 2003)))

2.2 Character characteristics

Our word under scrutiny is made up of two characters, 豆 *dòu* and 蔻 *kòu*. *Dòu* is relatively straightforward, in dictionaries you can find definitions, such as ‘bean’; ‘pod-bearing plant or its seeds’; ‘bean-shaped object’; etc. ?? *Kòu* on the other hand is much more specific, and dictionary entries usually direct the reader to other entries where the character is used, e.g., ‘used in 豆蔻’; ‘see 豆蔻 nutmeg, cardamom’; etc. ?? The case in point here is that *kòu* does not mean anything else, and it does not appear in other word, which is rare for a Chinese character.

蔻 *kòu* is made up of the radical for grass, 艹 *cǎo* ‘grass, herb’ ??, and a phonetic component 寇 *kòu* meaning ‘bandit’ which is a typical phono-semantic compound in Chinese. This sinogram however does not seem to exist before its emergence in the word for the spices, there is no record of 蔻 *kòu* before the 9th century. Was this character created for this purpose? It seems so. And if yes, then where does the /kou/ sound come from? We think it is likely a loanword.

Furthermore, doukou often appears in a form ?? where the first character too has the grass radical on top (i.e., 荳蔻). Featuring the grass radical on both characters seems to be a typical device in the naming foreign edible plants, often loanwords themselves. Cf. the Chinese words 草莓 *cǎoméi* ‘strawberry’, 菠菜 *bōcài* ‘spinach’, and an archaic³ word for ‘cumin’, 蒔蘿 *shíluó* ‘cumin’.

2.3 Lexicographical clues

Youwei Shi (2021) *Loanwords in the Chinese Language*. Routledge: “Doukou 豆蔻, meaning cardamom, introduced to China in the Tang dynasty, probably originated from Arabic takur, related to the name of the ancient port Takola.” (p. 44) No Arabic word like takur Points to a place: Takola.

³The modern word for cumin, 孜然 *zīrán* comes via Uyghur, from Sanskrit?

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