

# The Cultural Implication of the Internal Form of the Word ‘Areca Nut’ in Chinese Language

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**Abstract.** Since ancient times, some countries have always had a special affection for ‘areca nut’, and China is no exception. The existence of the areca nut was closely related to the life of ancient Chinese people. As a plant culture word in Chinese, the word ‘areca nut’ has a solid national cultural connotation. This study attempts to discuss the internal form of the word ‘areca nut’, especially the pronunciation, and using the historical documents related to ‘areca nut’ to explore the cultural connotation of areca nut that once existed in China. Through the analysis of the Chinese word for ‘areca nut’ (槟榔), we can see that the name of a new thing invented by Chinese people before is not random but combines the objective meaning of things with the way of thinking of Chinese people. Modern Chinese people have completely changed their view of the ‘areca nut’ and their aesthetic values and consider that the areca nut chewers are not members of a good civilization. However, ‘areca nut’ (槟榔) was still once a part of Chinese life. In addition, the Chinese word for ‘areca nut’ (槟榔), from the perspective of internal form, has been in line with the expression of modern Chinese, which can also be seen as Chinese people who want to meet or achieve a better life of an expectation.

**Keywords:** China; Areca nut; Cultural meaning; Internal form

## 1 Introduction

In a Course of General Linguistics, Saussure once pointed out that “the culture of a nation exerts an influence on its language, and the language, on the other hand, is largely responsible for the nation.” (Saussure, 2011:20). The Chinese plant word ‘areca nut’ has long appeared in Chinese Han Dynasty documents. Today, the word is still preserved and has a stable place in modern Chinese and is often mentioned and used. In addition, the national culture contained in the Chinese word for ‘areca nut’ is quite apparent. Su Xinchun put forward in *The Dictionary of Cultural Words and Definitions: Comprehensive understanding and the show* contains the national culture of a language vocabulary as a whole, rather than outside the existing words, to find out some ignored ethnic, cultural connotation of words or meanings, also do not want to existing words to a new category, which is shared by all kinds of language words, which is unique to the native language words. However, to transform a new Angle to examine the

cultural attributes of words, showing the national cultural significance contained in words. The cultural meaning of words reflects the connotation and characteristics of the national culture. (Su Xinchun,1995:38-39). As for the Chinese ‘areca nut’, we cannot only find out its meaning, its effect on the Chinese people at that time, and its relationship with Chinese culture and customs in ancient Chinese literature, but we need to also examine the cultural characteristics contained in the word from other perspectives. What is the cultural meaning behind ‘areca nut’ in Chinese? This is the main topic that this study focuses on.

## 2 Theoretical Framework and Methods

According to Su Xinchun (1995), in studying the cultural meaning of words, we should consider the meaning of words and explore the various forms or structures inside words clearly to highlight the cultural meaning behind words. Words in language do not come into being by chance, but most of them have reasons behind them that we do not know. These causes are what we call internal forms. Zhang Yongyan (1995) believes that “internal form refers to the reason or basis for expressing a certain meaning with a certain pronunciation.” This viewpoint and method can also start from the characteristics of things. The Chinese word for ‘鸭 *ya* (duck)’ gets its name from the sound of the duck makes. Another example: how did the Chinese word ‘牛乳蕉 *niuru jiao*’ come? According to Ceng Zhaocong (2010), in the Jin Dynasty of China, Ji Han wrote a book of 南方草木状 *Nanfang cao mu zhuang* (Vegetation in the South), in which he mentioned the types of fruit ‘甘蕉 *gan jiao* (香蕉 *xiangjiao*=banana)’. Meanwhile, the word ‘牛乳蕉 *niuru jiao* (a kind of banana)’ has been in existence since the Jin Dynasty in China. ‘牛乳 *niuru*’ in Chinese means ‘milk’. It is also a kind of banana, and the Chinese used it to interpret or invent the word ‘牛乳蕉 *niuru jiao* (a kind of banana)’ from the taste of this fruit is like milk. We can also dig out more information about this fruit in China. Through the internal form of a word, we can understand the generation, evolution, and development process of the word and explore the hidden story of the word in the naming process. Based on the naming method of ‘牛乳蕉 *niuru jiao*’, for example, the authors make an in-depth study of the word ‘槟榔 *binglang* (the areca nut)’ and attempt to find the cultural meaning of the word through its structure and internal form, primarily through its pronunciation. The author also use and collect some ancient Chinese literature related to the ‘areca nut’ plant as an example in exploring this word. By using descriptive analysis techniques to find out the cultural meaning contained in this word. Our study finds that the word has a remarkable story behind it, and our understanding of the word brings about a different understanding.

## 3 Results and Discussion

### 3.1 ‘仁频 *Renpin*’ is The Old Name of ‘Areca Nut’ and May Have Had Something to do With Indonesia

In Han Dynasty, Si Maqian in a book of 史记 *Shiji* (The Historical Record) mentioned about ‘槟榔 *binglang*’. Luo Changpei (1989), in his book 语言与文化 *Yuyan yu wenhua* (Language and Culture), once thought that this word should be the opposite of the Malay word ‘pinang’. The Javanese name for ‘pinang’ is ‘jambi’, which is probably a

transliteration from the sound of the word. Guo Shuo (2016) believed that the former word ‘仁频 *renpin*’ was ‘槟榔 *binglang* (the areca nut)’ might be correct, and was completely replaced by the word ‘areca nut’ after the Han Dynasty. According to their study, the word ‘仁频 *renpin*’ has rarely appeared in literature after the Han Dynasty. It can be seen that ‘仁频 *renpin*’ is the old name for the word ‘槟榔 *binglang* (the areca nut)’, and also an evolution of the word. The Indonesian word ‘jambi’ does not mean areca nut. It refers to the province of Sumatra, but the name is related to pinang. There are several theories about the origin of place names. There are several theories about the origin of place names. I took an explanation from the official Jambi city website, which says that the word ‘Jambi’ comes from the area on the banks of the Batang Hari river which was controlled by a queen named Puteri Selaras Pinang Masak (princess of areca palm). At that time, the region was influenced by the Manchu state of Java, so the Javanese language had a strong influence in the region, and the word ‘Pinang Masak’ (areca palm) is called ‘jambe’ (djém-bi) . Later, the locals gradually called it ‘Jambi’ (djém-bi) . According to Liang Liji (1982), in *Selayang Pandang Penyelidikan Mengenai Indonesia di Tiongkok*, the book of 汉书·地理志 *Han shu dili zhi* (Han, Geography) shows that Emperor Wudi of The Han Dynasty made a maritime road under his rule, one of which was tributary trade with the states of Malay Peninsula. From this, we can see that China and Indonesia already have a good relationship in this era. Due to the preponderance of The Javanese language, this era also led to the use of ‘槟榔 *binglang* (the areca nut)’ by Chinese living in Indonesia. The Indonesian ‘j’ and ‘r’ initials are often confused by the older generation of Chinese or Chinese speakers, who pronounce /djém as /rén/. The following syllables /béi/ and /bi/ are similar to /pín/. The authors believe that this is one of the reasons why predecessors combined the Chinese word ‘renpin’ with the Javanese word ‘Jambi’.

### 3.2 ‘槟榔 *Binglang* (The Areca Nut)’ Means to Treat Others Like A VIP

The ancients of China once believed that the areca nut had a significant effect on human life, so they regarded it as an essential item on various occasions. 汉书(The Book of Han) of Yan Shigu notes: “the word ‘仁频 *renpin*’ also named ‘宾粮 *binlang*, frequency namely as ‘guest’. Li Shizhen in Ming Dynasty in the book 本草纲目, wrote: “‘宾 *bin*’ and ‘郎 *lang*’ are said to be distinguished as guests. In the Han Dynasty, the word ‘宾粮 *binlang*’ and ‘仁频 *renpin*’ refer to the same thing, and ‘宾粮 *bin lang*’ and ‘槟榔 *bing lang*’ belong to the relationship of homonyms. It is mentioned in New Cantonese 广东新语·木语 *Guangdong xinyu.mu yu* (Guangdong Neologism) by Qu Dajun in the Qing Dynasty, “Guangdong people pay the most attention to areca nut, and regard it as a gift fruit.” Yang Qiu (2003) points out, from the point of view of language, in the word ‘槟榔 *binglang* (the areca nut)’, the word ‘槟 *bing*’ has similar sound with ‘宾 *bin*’, while in Cantonese, ‘槟榔 *binglang*’ and ‘宾临 *binlin*’ is homophonic. Not only that, the spittle produced by chewing areca is red, and red is considered lucky in China, so offering areca means ‘good luck’. The word ‘*láng*’ in ‘槟榔 *binglang*’ is made up of the Chinese character ‘郎 *láng*’. In Lingnan, South China, there used to be a marriage custom of ‘areca nut as gift’. They use areca in wedding ceremonies, containing a special meaning, indicating that the couple treats each other as guests. From the perspective of pictophonetic, the word ‘*bīn*’ in ‘槟榔 *binglang*’ means ‘贵宾 (Very Important Person)’ and ‘*láng*’ means ‘郎君(a gentleman, husband)’. The ancient Chinese used areca as

a courtesy to show that the host treated guests like a VIP. In addition, 'binglang' also implies that couples should treat each other with respect as guests in their married life.

### 3.3 The Word 'Areca Nut' Fits The Idiom of Modern Chinese

Although listed as a loanword of Malay or Indonesian word in the 新□□□□□□ *Xinhua wailaici cidian* (Chinese Loanword Dictionary), the word of '槟榔 *binglang*' has already become a part of Chinese word in □□□□□□ *Xiandai Hanyu Cidian* (Chinese Modern Dictionary). From the meaning of '槟榔 *binglang*', compared with '仁频 *renpin*', the word '槟榔 *binglang*' is more suitable for the expression habit of modern Chinese. The word '槟榔 *binglang*' is homophonic with '宾 *bin*' and '郎 *lang*' in Chinese and has rich cultural connotations. On the other hand, as the areca nut is a type of palm plant, in the process of the word change in Han language of this word, in addition to the coordination of pronunciation, '宾 *bin*' and '郎 *lang*' were also influenced by the Chinese radical '木 *mu* (wood)', and became '槟榔 *binglang*'.

## 4 Conclusion

The word '槟榔 *binglang*' itself has rich cultural connotations. For example, it is an indispensable food used to entertain guests in some places in China and even used as symbol of love between men and women in some areas, such as Lingnan and Hainan in Chinese history. Furthermore, in the marriage relationship, the areca nut is also used as a promise to the bride, indicating that the couple will always be like honored guests and respect each other after they get married. In addition, ancient Chinese believed that people with black lips from chewing areca nuts looked beautiful. In the modern world, medical studies have shown that areca nut chewing is not a good habit and may even be harmful. As a result, modern Chinese people do not value areca nut as much as they used to, and the culture of areca nut is fading. Not only that, most modern Chinese have entirely changed their view and aesthetic view of '槟榔 *binglang*' and regard the areca nut chewing person as not having a civilized behavior. In short, although modern Chinese people's view of 'areca nut' has completely changed, still 'areca nut' was once a part of life in ancient China. In addition, the cultural meaning of Chinese words should not only consider the existing meaning of words, but also combine various internal forms or structures inside words to better highlight the cultural meaning behind words. By analyzing the word '槟榔 *binglang*' in this study, we can see that Chinese people usually combine the objective meaning of things with their way of thinking when naming things in the past, rather than naming things randomly. From the perspective of internal form, the word '槟榔 *binglang*' conforms to the expression related to the habit of modern Chinese and shows Chinese people's expectation for a better life.

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