COGNITIVE EFFICIENCY: THE *SHENG* PHENOMENON IN KENYA

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Abstract

Sheng is a variety of Kiswahili that is spoken by young persons, especially from the economically challenged neighbourhoods of Nairobi. The emergence and pervasiveness of the idiom can be explained by cognitive as well as social parameters. Confronted with several languages in Nairobi, a young mind is likely to weave a compromise idiom from the linguistic inputs available. This might be an explanation for the emergence of *Sheng*. Once acquired, the language could now be used to include or exclude. This discussion¹ attempts to provide an overview of the linguistic structure of *Sheng* and hypothesize on reasons for its emergence.

Keywords: *Sheng*, Cognitive efficiency, Social identity, Social cohesion, Kiswahili.

1. Introduction

Kenya presents a panoply of about 40 (forty) African languages employed among its (30) thirty million people². This rainbow of languages represents three broad categories, to wit, Niger-Congo, Nilo-Saharan and Afro-Asiatic. Kiswahili, the national language, is a *bantu* language and belongs squarely in the Niger-Congo fringe. The term *bantu* designates *people* or *human beings* in a number of African languages and was therefore employed by researchers as a classification criterion (Bleek 1862-1869 cited in Phillipson (2003)).

In addition, the country's linguistic repertoire includes English, a consequence of British colonization from 1895 to 1963, and *Sheng*. English is the official language. The other African languages are taught in lower primary schools situated in the rural areas. *Sheng* however is not taught formally but picked up informally from peers and older youths. But what is *Sheng* and what may have prompted its emergence in Nairobi? In this discussion, we attempt to provide a panoramic view of *Sheng*. We, therefore, do not claim to

¹ We are greatly indebted to two anonymous reviewers whose critique considerably enhanced the quality of this paper.

² The 1998 Government Census shows 28 million people.

exhaustively analyse such a complex idiom. But before we attempt an answer, let us briefly examine the linguistic map of Kenya.

2. Languages of Kenya

2.1. A historical background

During the colonial era, the African languages³ played second violin to English. Africans were taught a minimal grammar to serve the interests of the colonial administration. These included rendering manual, clerical, religious or technical services. Moreover, the administration went ahead to propose an educational system in which the language of instruction was vernacular. English was deemed too complex and sophisticated for the local people. The Africans reacted sharply to the enactment of vernacular schools and created the *independent schools* where instruction was to be in English. To them, the move by the colonial administration was to maintain the local people in relative ignorance for better subservience to the British. The language conflict was born.

Shortly after Kenya joined the ranks of free nations, English was adopted as the official language, and Kiswahili the *lingua franca*. Eleven (11) years later, in 1974, Kiswahili became the national language⁴. This official line meant that the language of instruction in all institutions of learning was to be English. However, in lower primary classes teaching could be done in Kiswahili, in urban centres, or in indigenous languages, in the rural settings.

In 1985, the government of Kenya made Kiswahili a compulsory and examinable subject in secondary schools. Hitherto, Kiswahili was optional among French, German or Accounts. The decision placed Kiswahili on more or less the same podium with English. As a result, students and teachers had to redouble their efforts to study Kiswahili.

It is instructive to note that Kiswahili, being a Bantu language, was not always welcome by the non Bantu communities in Kenya. The latter were not convinced of the suitability of Kiswahili as a national language. This is yet another illustration of language conflict.

Sheng, on the other hand, has been growing and expanding in the urban centres, especially Nairobi, although it is not taught in school. Difficult to locate in time when it may have emerged, this language is attested in the early 1960s, with a definitive mark in the late 1960s. Some authors claim that the language originated from one neighbourhood called Kaloleni and spread out to others (Adulaziz & Osinde 1997; cited in Githiora 2002). Origins of languages are not always so easy to locate in time, and *Sheng* is no exception. So what is *Sheng*?

³ These languages are also referred to as *vernacular*, *native*, or *indigenous* languages.

⁴ The current draft constitution recommends Kiswahili as an official language, over and above its role as a national language.

3. Characteristics of *Sheng*

Firstly, *Sheng* is a language created by borrowing words from Kiswahili, local African languages, English, French, among others, and stringing them using a Kiswahili syntax. It is to many a version of Kiswahili, despite its mosaic of borrowed terms. In its effort to unite many languages within it and simplify Kiswahili structures, the language resembles a pidgin, or even a creole (Githiora 2002). Secondly, *Sheng* is not a written language. The writer knows of only monthly paper, *Matatu Whispers*, that has some snippets of *Sheng*. The other significant publication is a concise *Sheng*-English dictionary of about 800 (eight hundred) entries (Moga & Danfee 2004). Obviously, *Sheng* has much more than this number of entries. Our main, though paltry, source of written *Sheng* language is from the two publications. We complement the data with our own experience as older users of the idiom. Thirdly, in view of the paucity of written records in *Sheng*, it is unrealistic to attempt to conclusively determine the percentage of words that *Sheng* has borrowed from other languages. Nevertheless, we have on the basis of the dictionary alone, found that *Sheng* is about 13% English, 20% Kiswahili and 67% other sources.

3.1. Lexical items

When a language borrows it is mainly in the area of vocabulary. Languages evolve and rejuvenate themselves over time, if they do not wither and die altogether. New lexical terms emerge as the technological and scientific landscapes evolve. Little wonder then, that lexical paradigms are said to be *open* to new additions (Martinet 1980). Moreover, these paradigms are *conceptual* in the sense that they denote or designate entities in the world, real or possible, or attribute qualities to them. The conceptual paradigms comprise nouns, adjectives and adverbs (Moeschler 2000).

The *Sheng* system renovates its lexicon almost every five years or so. For instance, the word for *a hundred shillings* mutated from *hando*, in the seventies, to *masai*, in the eighties, and finally to *soo* or *red* in the nineties. Likewise, the verb *to eat* changed, for the same periods, from *minya* to *sosi*, then to *dishi*, and finally to *dema*. This constant evolution of terms exemplifies *Sheng*'s dynamism. Adjectives and adverbs have been changing too through the times.

3.2. Nouns

Sheng borrows from various languages: The word *bike* (from English) becomes *baiki* or *njaik*; *argent* (French for *money*) *arija*; *chokra* (Hindi for a lad) *chokora*; *nyoni* (bird in Gikuyu - a *bantu* language) is modified phonologically to give *nyooni*. Evidently, the borrowed word is made to conform to Kiswahili syllabic structure, to wit consonant-vowel-consonant-vowel or vowel-consonant-vowel.

The borrowings can also be modified either by reducing the number of or inverting the syllables. For instance, *Basketball*, *Nairobi*, *zamani* (early), *Safari* give rise to *bake*, *Nai*, *zamo* and *safo*. Inversion is more subtle. *Mother* was *matha* in the 60s; then in the 90s, another transformation occurred and *matha* mutated to *masa*, and finally to *sama*. In

addition, *plani* (From English *plan*) is inverted to *nipla*. Syllabic inversion is reminiscent of *verlan*, a mode of speaking that is popular among young French people⁵. *Sheng* also modifies kiswahili words upon borrowing them. For instance, *nyama* (meat) becomes *nyake* or *nyaks*. Here, the second syllable is changed from *-ma* to *-ke*, and the last vowel at times is changed to an *s*. Although we can safely assume that the *s* is a plural generalization copied from English, we are altogether at a loss to explain why the syllable *ma* is changed to *ke*. The same applies to *shamba* (farm) which is *shake* in *Sheng*.

Lexical innovation abounds in *Sheng*. Most words are derived from creative similes and metaphors. The origin of the rest remains opaque. A few examples may suffice.

<i>Sheng</i> vocabulary	Meaning	Possible origin or metaphor
Buda	Father	Buddha
Kipepeo	Young lady	Kipepeo is <i>butterfly</i> in Kiswahili
Kamdudu	AIDS	Means <i>small worm</i> in Kiswahili.
Shaba	Girl	Kiswahili for <i>copper</i>
Chapa	Money	unknown
Msosi	Food	Unknown

Table 1: *Sheng* nouns

Let us now examine some verbs.

3.3. Verbs

Sheng enjoys a great wealth of verbs drawn from Kiswahili, English and other languages. The particle *ku* precedes a verb in Kiswahili and *Sheng* to form the infinitive form, e.g. *kusoma* (to read).

<i>Sheng</i> verb	Meaning	Possible origin
kuedi	To die	English: <i>ku-dead</i>
kuzubu	To be dumbfounded, confused	Kiswahili: <i>kuzubaa</i>
Kung'ethia	To stare agape, to be confused.	Gikuyu: <i>kung'ethia</i> (to stare open-mouthed)
Kubonga	To chat, speak	Unknown

⁵ *Cablé* (connected) gives *bléca*, *femme* (woman), *meuf*, etc.

Kudema	To eat	English: <i>ku-demolish</i>
Kusota	To be short of money	Unknown.

Table 2: Sheng verbs

3.4. Adjectives

The *Sheng* language innovates tremendously in the domain of adjectives. Again, the idiom borrows and modifies words from other languages. It also creates new qualifiers.

<i>Sheng</i> adjectives	Meaning	Possible origin
Supu	Cute	English: <i>super</i>
Sodi	Big	Unknown
Poa	Cool (great)	Kiswahili: <i>kupoa</i> (to lose heat)
Shanoka	Wise, clever	Kiswahili: <i>kuchanuka</i> (to be combed)
Mbabi	Affluent (and possibly oppressive)	English: <i>Babylon</i> . The term metaphorically refers to oppressive political systems.
Mezeshu	Problematic	Kiswahili: <i>kumeza</i> (to swallow)

Table 3: Sheng adjectives

3.5. Adverbs

The *Sheng* adverbs are drawn from the adjectives or the nouns. For instance *poa* (cool) gives *vipoa* (in a cool or nice manner), *fala* (fool) gives birth to *kiufala* (in a foolish way). This pattern is modelled along Kiswahili: *vipoa/vizuri*, *kiufala/kijinga*.

If languages innovate a great deal in the area of lexical paradigms, there is little creativity in the domain of grammatical or functional words like articles, tenses, prepositions, and conjunctions, just to mention a few (Martinet 1980). Let us examine how *Sheng* handles this paradigm.

4. Grammatical words

4.1. Prepositions, articles, negation, and connectors

Sheng, like Kiswahili, has no articles, a tendency observed in pidgins and creoles. As an offshoot of Kiswahili, it would have been uneconomical for *Sheng* to burden itself with articles when Kiswahili does not have them. Therefore, *a/the girl* is simply *msichana* (girl) in Kiswahili, and *demu/manzi/kipepeo* in *Sheng*.

Kiswahili has suffixes and prepositions, and *Sheng* endeavours to copy them. For instance, *in the house* is *nyumbani* (*nyumba*-house, *ni*-location) or *kwa nyumba* (in house). In such a case, *Sheng* can use *kwa haao* (in house). *Haao* is, no doubt, from *house*).

With respect to negation, *Sheng* follows the Kiswahili model. Verbs ending with *-a* change it to *-i* (1), while the rest remain unchanged (2).

(1a) Msichana a-na-enda

Girl she-TAM-go

The girl is going.

(1b) Msichana ha-endi.

Girl NEG-go

The girl is not going.

(2a) Msichana a-na-sali

Girl she-TAM-pray

The girl is praying.

(2b) Msichana ha-sali

Girl NEG-pray

A girl is not praying.

In (3) and (4), *Sheng* appears to follow the same rule. Here, *kudema* and *kusosi* are synonyms for *to eat*:

(3a) Manzi a-na-dema

Girl she-TAM⁶-eat

The girl is eating.

(3b) Manzi ha-demi.

Girl NEG-go

The girl is not eating.

(4a) Msee a-na-sosi.

Guy he-TAM-eat

The guy is eating.

(4b) Msee ha-sosi.

Guy NEG-eat

The guy is not eating.

⁶ Tense Aspect Marker.

4.2. Tense and aspect

A tense locates an event on the axis of time, i.e. it determines whether an event is present, past or future. On the other hand, aspect describes the ontology of events, i.e. is the event to be viewed as accomplished or unaccomplished, durative or non-durative, telic (having an end) or atelic (no end), and so on and so forth (Kearns 2000). In Kiswahili, the tense and aspect studies are legion, and point to the importance of context in interpreting tenses (Contini-Morava 1989; Kang'ethe 2002, 2003a).

Generally, *Sheng* is parasitic upon Kiswahili insofar as tense and aspect is concerned. However, there are instances where *Sheng* omits a tense-aspect marker like in (5):

- (5) Amina a-sha-dishi
 Amina she-already-eat
Amina has already eaten.

Compare with (6) in Kiswahili:

- (6) Amina a-me-kwisha kula.
 Amina she-TAM-already to eat
Amina has already eaten.

This omission while describing past events is almost systematic in *Sheng* discourse. The presence of *-sha*, a remnant of *kwisha* (already), appears sufficient to locate the event in question at a time prior to speech time. Although the trend is more prevalent in *Sheng*, it has also been attested in Kiswahili, especially spoken Kiswahili in Nairobi. We believe this could be a case for cognitive efficiency, achieving optimal results with minimum effort.

Sheng prefers the tense-aspect marker *na* over other tenses in describing past, future and habitual events. In traditional grammar, *na* describes an event happening at speech time (Waihiga 1999; Mohammed 2001), but more recent studies point to more uses of *na* (Kang'ethe 2003b). Indeed, *na* can describe an event in the past or future. The morphemes *me* or *li* describe past events, among other things, while *ta* is used for future events. This is a conflict between tenses. For instance, *Sheng* would rather employ (7) in lieu of (8) in standard Kiswahili.

- (7) Tina a-na-ishia Mombao moro.
 Tina she-TAM-disappear Mombasa tomorrow
Tina is going to Mombasa tomorrow.
 (8) Tina a-ta-enda Mombasa kesho.
 Tina she-TAM-go Mombasa tomorrow
Tina will go to Mombasa tomorrow.

Similarly, when describing a habitual event, Kiswahili employs *hu* (9a), whereas *Sheng* prefers *na* (9b):

(9a) Daktari hu-ja saa mbili.

Doctor TAM-come hour two

The doctor comes at 8 o'clock.

(9b) Doki a-na-come saa mbe.

Doctor he-TAM-come hour two.

The doctor comes at 8 o'clock.

We argue, in Kang'ethe (1999, 2003b), that the reason why *na* tends to replace other morphemes could be its capacity to mentally evoke a picturesque image of an event, whether present, past or future. This is because in its basic semantics, *na* in Kiswahili describes an event happening at speech time. Other meanings are extensions of this basic meaning. In another words, it creates a special effect of the event, an effect we termed *cinematographic effect*. Little wonder then that *Sheng* should prefer *na* over *ta* and *hu* in its descriptions.

In sum, *Sheng* invariably employs *na* to describe present, past, future and habitual events. In Kiswahili, these events would be described using *na*, *me* or *li*, *ta* and *hu* respectively. In other words, *Sheng* cognitively achieves with one morpheme what would be achieved by Kiswahili with the five morphemes. This could be another case for cognitive efficiency.

4.3. Syntax

Sheng syntax or word order is not significantly different from Kiswahili syntax. But there are some notable divergences. Firstly, *Sheng* omits relative pronouns. This might be an influence from local African languages. It could also be interference from English. In (10), the relative pronoun *ambacho* (roughly *that/which*) is omitted. Compare with Kiswahili in (11):

(10) Hiyo ni storu ni-ta-kw-ambia another day.

That is story I-TAM-you-tell another day

That is a story (that) I'll narrate to you another day.

(11) Hicho ni kisa kingine ambacho ni-ta-kw-ambia siku nyingine.

That is story another that I-TAM-you-tell day another

That is a story that I'll narrate to you another day.

Secondly, *Sheng* tends to scuttle the categorization of nouns, so sacred in Kiswahili. No doubt, the Kiswahili noun system has more than eight classes, and the controversy over them is not about to end. We do not discuss all the noun classes, but an illustration with one

class will suffice. Let's take the animate/inanimate class. In (12a), the entry *woman*, being animate and human should be described, in Kiswahili, with *wa* in the possessive pronoun, but *Sheng* can do with *ya*, associated with inanimate objects (12b):

(12a) Mpenzi wake a-me-lala.

Dame POSSESSIVE she-TAM-sleep

His girlfriend is asleep.

(12b) Demu yake a-me-tuna.

Dame POSSESSIVE she-TAM-sleep

His girlfriend is asleep.

Likewise, in (13a), the demonstrative pronoun *ndiyo*, inanimate, replaces *ndiye*, animate (13b):

(13a) Teacher wa-mine ndiyo a-li-kuwa a-na-tu-tell hizo storu.

Teacher of-mine DEMONSTRATIVE he-TAM-be he-TAM-us-tell those stories

My teacher is the one who was telling us those stories.

(13b) Mwalimu wangu, ndiye a-li-kuwa a-na-tu-eleza hizo ngano.

Teacher mine DEMONSTRATIVE he-TAM-be he-TAM-us-tell those stories

My teacher is the one who was telling us those stories.

It can be noted here, that *Sheng* imposes a Kiswahili syntactical structure on English syntax. Thus, *my teacher* becomes *Teacher wa-mine* (Teacher of mine) like in Kiswahili's *Mwalimu wangu*.

5. Prosody

Although modelled along Kiswahili, *Sheng* seems to have a prosodic pattern of its own. First, the language prefers endings in **-i** and **-e**, the former for words borrowed and modified from English *dedi* (die), *noki* (go crazy), *seti* (to set, beat up), *chizi* (go nuts), *cheki* (look, see, check). Counterexamples include *ukweli* (*truth* in Kiswahili) and *mzee* (*old man* in Kiswahili) to *ukwela* and *mzae* respectively. Other words borrowed from Kiswahili and other languages have **-e** at the end⁷: *nyake*, *dere*, *ombenye* respectively *meat*, *driver*, *know-it-all*. Generally, the endings in *i* and *e* give *Sheng* a clear pitch to *Sheng*, since the buccal aperture is minimal.

⁷ Family relations are borrowed from English, Swahilicized, then *Shengified* by changing *-a* to *-e*, e.g. *father*, *fatha* and finally *fathe*.

One other amazing trait in *Sheng* is how it transforms some words, to make them start and with vowels, especially *o* and *a*. This is particularly the case with names of places, nouns and proper nouns:

<i>Sheng</i>	Meaning	Possible origin
Obaro	road	Barabara (Kiswahili)
Ocha or oshago	Country side	Gichagi (Gikuyu)
Odaro	classroom	Darasa (Kiswahili)
Odiro	window	Window (English)
Onyato	Kenyatta (name of first president of Kenya)	Proper noun
Ololo	Kaloleni (name of a neighbourhood in Nairobi)	Proper noun

I have a hunch that these transformations could have been influenced by the Dholuo language, a nilotic language that is largely spoken in Kenya. Luos constitute the second largest ethnic group after the Gikuyu. In dholuo, many words, including proper nouns, start and end with vowel *o*.

On another note, speakers of *Sheng* have a tendency to pull sentences, thereby lengthening their debit (number of syllables pronounced per second). The lengthening makes *Sheng* audible, relaxed and easy to follow.

6. Usage of *Sheng*

Recent research (Githiora 2002) and older studies (Nzungu 1994; Ileri-Mbaabu 1996) focus on *Sheng* and its usage. We shall only summarize the main discussion here. It is clear that the language is first and foremost used by urban youth from relatively impoverished neighbourhoods in Nairobi. The eastern neighbourhoods seem more active in creating and using the idiom. Older people also use it, but the 60 plus age-group is not familiar with it, since they were already in their twenties and spoke mother tongue and at times English well before *Sheng* irrupted in Nairobi in the 1960s. *Sheng* can be used also to exclude non initiates, including parents. It is a language of solidarity and identity among youths.

7. Emergence of *Sheng*

The data presented point to several things regarding *Sheng*. Let us try and summarize them. *Sheng*, among other things:

- ❑ Tends to shorten lexical items (Basketball/bake, zamani/zamo)
- ❑ Does not follow noun classes to the letter
- ❑ Taps on existing languages (Kiswahili, English, indigenous languages)

- to create new words
- to create its syntax
- ❑ Simplifies the tense-aspect system by omitting *me* or by replacing other tenses with *na*
- ❑ Has a basic Kiswahili syntax and lexicon
- ❑ Employs a figurative or picturesque language - *kipepeo* (butterfly), *shaba* (copper) for *girl*
- ❑ Modifies the sound pattern of Kiswahili to create sharper sounds
 - Innovates sound patterns (the *o* and *ke* phenomena)
- ❑ Excludes older people from conversation
- ❑ Asserts the identity of young persons

Ileri-Mbaabu (1996) aptly observes that *Sheng* is a “...solution to multilingualism, the lack of cohesion and nationalism in society, and a policy that makes them (Kenyans) at least trilingual”. This is an accurate observation that recognizes that *Sheng* has arisen out of necessity, social necessity. He blames the emergence of *Sheng* on the absence of a focussed language policy in Kenya. Again this could be true.

We hypothesize, however, that even with a three-tier language policy (indigenous language, Kiswahili and English), *Sheng* would still have arisen. The first reason is cognitive efficiency. A young mind that is juggling with so many languages in contact, and mastering none, is likely to weave a composite system from the resources at its disposal to communicate. The traits of *Sheng* outlined in this discussion signal such linguistic creativity. Extensive borrowing, lexical and syllabic modifications, and idiosyncratic sound systems point to cognitive dynamism. If the essence of speaking is communication, the new idiom did it, and with less effort too, in comparison to Kiswahili and English. The latter languages must require more effort to learn, a fact borne out by the relatively poor performance in national examinations⁸. *Sheng* is pervasive in Nairobi and yet it is not taught formally. Its form and idiosyncracies are learnt and absorbed relatively fast by young minds. *Sheng* picks out the relevant information from the languages in Kenya and therefore responds to a cognitive criterion to communicate effectively with less mental effort. We believe this cognitive dimension may be the root cause for the emergence of *Sheng*.

Secondly, with such an awesome and efficient idiom it was not going to be long before it could be used to include and exclude. Older people and even young persons from other smaller towns were excluded. Inversion of Kiswahili syllables may have been an attempt at obfuscating communication before other persons. Social cohesion and group identity was enhanced through the idiom. In other words, the social motives of *Sheng* could be consequent and subordinate to cognitive considerations.

In light of the linguistic map of Kenya, *Sheng* is obviously in conflict with the other languages. We attempt to schematize the conflict in Figure 1:

⁸ The national averages for Kiswahili and English were 38% and 39% respectively for Secondary Schools in 2003.

The idea is that faced with an event, observable or imagined, a young or youthful Nairobiian is faced with several language options, namely Kiswahili, English, indigenous language and of course *Sheng*. The event is captured by organs of perception (Fodor 1986), and a mental picture is created in the mind. The issue forthwith is deciding which language will describe the event. We posit that there are two main factors that tilt the balance: Cognitive and social. Firstly, given the chance, a youth from Nairobi would be given to using *Sheng* in all contexts, formal or informal, since it is cognitively efficient. Secondly, in the presence of an older person or someone (young or old) from another socioeconomic milieu, the speaker may choose *Sheng* to exclude them. Again, in contact with other ethnic communities, an informal discussion will favour either *Sheng* or Kiswahili.

On the other hand, in formal settings, like interviews or office functions, English carries the day. Outside of formal settings (offices and schools), *Sheng* has a field day. The language provides the learner with a limitless lexicon drawn from other languages as we have seen above. Moreover, its capacity to criss-cross between Kiswahili and indigenous languages, helps *Sheng* edge out English. Put in another way, it is easier for a youth to describe an event using *Sheng* than to use English or Kiswahili. The latter languages have been codified and are regulated by complex grammatical rules. *Sheng* appears to be emancipated from the shackles of a rigorous grammatical code. In fact, *Sheng* appears to blunt out the sharp edges of English and Kiswahili grammars. It is a compromise idiom, epitomizing cognitive efficiency, i.e. harnessing the resources at the mind's disposal to communicate with least effort and maximum effect.

8. Conclusions

Sheng competes with Kiswahili, English and indigenous languages, since these languages may not be equal to the cognitive and pragmatic needs of young people in urban communities, especially the deprived neighbourhoods. It breathes, innovates, grows and rejuvenates itself continuously. *Sheng* also serves as a powerful tool for group cohesion in the face of socio-economic exclusion. It also responds to this exclusion by excluding too, though linguistically. These socioeconomic factors are complemented by cognitive factors that make *Sheng* a better choice than the other languages. It is simply easier to manipulate mentally.

Finally, the characteristics outlined above point to a language that deserves our attention. It cannot be wished away, but should be studied and documented properly. In any case, it is spoken by many, and continues to expand and spread its wings. Okoth-Okombo (2001: 35) aptly notes that: “**Pluralism is the African reality**. Policies that cannot accommodate that fact are unlikely to be of any good to Africa and her people” (bold in original). We hope to have contributed, though humbly, to ongoing studies on *Sheng*.

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