

How to understand “Six Kes A Day” in the combination “Five Gengs A Night, Six Kes A Day”



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ABSTRACT: When interpreting the word "ke", in addition to the definition of "a quarter hour", "15 minutes", some dictionaries also determine that this word also means "one sixth of the day, according to the division method of the ancient people". Therefore, after referring the explanations of some dictionaries, this article has examined the works on Chinese and Vietnamese calendars and the method of time tracking in ancient records to confirm that there was no definition of “ke” as one sixth of the day. At the same time, to prove the presence of the phrase "six kes a day", ("give gengs a night, six kes a day") in modern Vietnamese, the author has analyzed two reasons for its existence. One is about structure, the other is about semantics.

KEYWORDS: Ke, six kes a day, calendar, structure, semantics.

INTRODUCTION

"Five gengs a night, six kes a day" is called an idiom by some authors, but in order to avoid unnecessary argument, we call it a combination. Up to now, the time-denoting word "geng" and the division of 5 gengs in the night are consistently understood in the calendar and the daily way of speaking. Meanwhile, in real communications, there still exists the saying "six kes a day" or "five gengs a night, six kes a day", but whether "ke" is equal to "one sixth of the day" or not, what “six kes a day” means are still not explicitly explained.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

"Ke" in hermeneutic dictionaries

The authors of Vietnamese dictionaries all have a consistent interpretation of "geng" as well as its Chinese concept. Accordingly, "geng" is one fifth of the night, corresponding to two hours. Vietnamese people often say geng along with numbers: geng one, geng two, geng three, geng four, geng five. Therefore, in this article, we only discuss "ke".

For the sake of interpretation, we combine the interpretations of the authors of the dictionaries into three groups according to the concept of "ke" as: a time-denoting word; an equivalent of 15 minutes; both an equivalent of 15 minutes and an equivalent of one sixth of the day.

- Group 1. "Ke" is interpreted as a time-denoting word without specifying 15 minutes, including Dao Duy Anh, [1, p. 401]; Nguyen Lan, [13, p. 355]; Buu Ke only says that it is "a unit of time" [11, p. 945].

- Group 2. "Ke" is interpreted as a time of 15 minutes, including authors such as Huynh Tinh Cua Paulus [6, p. 476]; Tran Van Chanh [3, p. 120].

- Group 3. "Ke" has both a meaning of 15 minutes and a meaning of one sixth of the day, "according to the division method of the ancient people", for convenience of analysis, it is to be quoted as follows:

According to Thanh Nghi, “ke” is interpreted as: “noun. 1. A quarter hour, 15 minutes. 2. One sixth of the day, according to ancient sayings: *Five gengs a night, six kes a day* (idiom).” [14, p. 753]

According to Khai Tri Editorial Board, "ke" is "noun. 1. A quarter hour, 15 minutes. 2. One sixth of the day, according to ancient sayings: *Five gengs a night, six kes a day* (idiom).” [2, p. 468]

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According to Van Tan, "ke" is "noun. 1. A quarter hour. 2. One sixth of the day, from morning to afternoon, according to ancient sayings: *Six kes a day waiting for the king* (Lament of a Royal Concubine)." [19, p. 419]

According to Lai Cao Nguyen, "ke" is: "2. A quarter hour. *Four kes an hour*. 3. (archaic) One sixth of the day, from morning to afternoon. *Six kes a day, five gengs a night. Six kes a day waiting for the king* (Lament of a Royal Concubine)." [15, p. 244]

According to Hoang Phe's group, "ke" is: "noun. (archaic; rare) 1. A quarter hour. 2. A short time period. *In love for a ke, in gratitude in a life* (folk saying). 3. A time period equal to one sixth of the day (excluding night; according to ancient time division method). *Five gengs a night, six kes a day*." [18, p. 475]

According to the authors at Vietnam Lexicography Center, "ke" is "noun. (archaic, rare) 1. A quarter hour. 2. A short time period. *Today we reunite, In love for a ke, in gratitude in a life*. (folk saying). 3. A time period equal to one sixth of the day (excluding night), according to ancient time division method. *Five gengs a night my sorrow pours out, Six kes a day our vow goes on*. (folk saying)." [22, p. 767]

According to Bui Duc Tinh, "ke" is "1. A quarter hour, 15 minutes. One sixth of the day, ancient interpretation. *Five gengs a night, six kes a day*." [20, p. 564]

The above search results made us wonder for the following reasons:

(1) Some dictionary authors (third party) claim that "ke" is both 15 minutes and a sixth of the day, which means "ke" denotes two different quantities of time!

(2) In order to prove that "ke" is equal to one sixth of the day, the authors above have three references: i) The combination "five gengs a night, six kes a day", (Thanh Nghi, Khai Tri Editorial Board, Hoang Phe, Bui Duc Tinh); ii) The folk saying "Five gengs a night my sorrow pours out, Six kes a day our vow goes on", (Vietnam Lexicography Center); iii) The verse "Six kes a day waiting for the king" (Lament of a Royal Concubine), (Van Tan, Lai Cao Nguyen). These references only prove that there is a saying "six kes a day" but not that "the day is divided into six kes".

(3) Some dictionary authors referred "five gengs a night, six kes a day" as "idiom", but their dictionaries do not contain such idiom. (Thanh Nghi, Khai Tri Editorial Board). We continued to look up in idiom dictionaries but the authors of the three idiom dictionaries below did not include "five gengs a night, six kes a day" into their works as if they did not consider it as idiom (Nguyen Luc, Luong Van Dang, 1978, "Vietnamese idioms", Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi; Vu Dung, Vu Thuy Anh, Vu Quang Hao, 2000, "Vietnamese idiom and proverb dictionary", Culture - Information Publishing House, Hanoi; Nguyen Nhu Y et al., 1998, "Vietnamese idiom dictionary", Vietnam Education Publishing House, Hanoi).

This combination was included in "Vietnamese proverb dictionary" by Nguyen Duc Duong [7, p. 326,327]. Along with the interpretation, the author included footnote 128 at the foot of page 326 as follows: "Ke. noun. A time period equal to one sixth of the day (excluding night; according to ancient time division method.)", which is not different from the interpretation of the above authors. They said "according to ancient saying" but it is unclear what the saying exactly is! Most likely, the interpretation of "ke is a time period equal to one sixth of the day" is just a conclusion of Nguyen Duc Duong and the above authors based on the saying "six kes a day" in literature which they considered an axiom!

(4) The following questions arise: in the concept of "ke is equal to one sixth of the day", how long is each ke, what are the terms of those kes, what kes did the ancient calendars and records list, why do we only see time-denoting zodiac terms (Rat, Ox, Tiger, Cat, etc.) and hardly ever see any term of ke regarding the day, if it exists, such as, "Hey, we'll go to the district market at ke one tomorrow!"

"Ke" in Chinese and Vietnamese calendars and other works

"Ke" in Chinese calendars

a. Ancient Chinese chronographs

According to Xu Li Li in the article "How did ancient Chinese track time?", ancient Chinese chronographs are of the following types:

- (1) Bronze pool - artificial pools made of bronze with a pole with markings in the middle to track time;
- (2) Charts - columns and tables to determine time based on directions and shadows;
- (3) Incense - incense made of wood with constant burning rates and markings to read time based on the level of burnt parts;
- (4) Bullet tube, a method which uses three round copper bullets to be dropped into three round bamboo tubes placed in a zigzag shape to track time. [16, p. 143-144].

Note: Some words are derived from time measuring instruments

- The markings on the pole in the bronze pool gave rise to the time-denoting word "ke" (ke: marking).
- The bronze pool and the marking pole gave rise to the word "ke lou" (according to Dao Duy Anh, "ke is the marking and lou is the leaked drop of water" [1, p. 401]), which is metonymously interpreted both as a bronze pool and time passing by, as in The Tale of Kieu: "Time passes by (ke lou) at night - Leaves under the wind, mirror under the moon".

- Ke lou or shui lou is basically a bronze pool to read time. Therefore, the time-reading "machine" of the West introduced to us later is called a "clock" metaphorically, although there was no need for the pool above (clock literally means bronze pool).

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b. How long is a "ke" in modern Western calendars

Also according to Xu Li Li, since ancient times, the division of a full day and night into 100 "kes" was applied for a long time. By the time of Emperor Wu of Han, there appeared the 120 "ke" division method. In 507, Emperor Wu of Liang regulated it to be 96 "kes". In the Ming Dynasty, after being exposed to the Western calendar, the Chinese agreed to divide a day and night into 96 "kes". (See [16, p. 145]). Accordingly, a "ke" is 15 minutes according to Western calendars.

c. Time of day and night

According to Xu Li Li, the "Huainanzi" stated that, from sunrise to sunset, there are 15 periods as follows: shen ming, fei ming, dan ming, can shi, yan shi, yu zhong, zheng zhong, xiao huan, bu shi, dai huan, gao zhong, xia chong, xian sha, huang hun, ding hun. The Dong Han dynasty divided a full day and night into twelve zodiac hours as follows: Rat - midnight, Ox - ji ming, Tiger - ping dan, Rabbit - sunrise, Dragon - shi shi, Snake - yu zhong, Horse - ri zhong, Goat - ri die, Monkey - bu shi, Rooster - sunset, Dog - evening, Pig - ren ding. From the Song Dynasty onwards, each hour was divided into two parts: chu / zheng, which means 12 hours were divided into 24. (See [16, p. 143,145]). The article "Time tracking methods of ancient Chinese", translated by Huynh Chuong Hung from the Chinese original "Calendars in ancient China" on the Chinese website baike.baidu, discusses the same topic as Xu Li Li's. Almost all the information in this article is similar to that of Xu Li Li in the book "History of Chinese Culture", so we shall not refer further. Similar to Xu Li Li's work, the article on that website never mentioned the concept of "ke" in the sense of "one sixth of the day" and that led us to the conclusion that perhaps this unit has never existed in Chinese calendars.

"Ke" in Vietnamese calendars

As can be seen, in the ancient records left by our ancestors which were collected by Phan Huy Chu and later compiled by Tran Van Giap, there is almost no emphasis on calendars. One major work that included a section for calendars is the "Categorized Sayings from the Van Terrace", (1773), by Le Quy Don. A second set of books with subjects related to calendars is "Dai Nam Regulations", (1868), by the Nguyen Dynasty Cabinet. In the twentieth century, the most remarkable work on calendars was "Calendars and Vietnamese Calendar", (1982), by Hoang Xuan Han.

a. In "Categorized Sayings from the Van Terrace", "Symbol" section, Le Quy Don devoted Article 7 and 8 to calendar-making methods and he determined that a full day and night has 96 "kes", each "ke" is equal to 15 minutes: "The Western (European) calendar also makes 360 the number of degrees, 96 kes make up a day, each hour has eight kes, there is no odd number, it makes for convenience and simplicity" [9, p. 84]. In articles 20 to 26, Le Quy Don gave explanations about time measuring instruments and methods of determining year, solar term, date, time, ke. We will refer a small point in article 24, the method of determining the time of "sunrise":

"1. Tiger hours: Summer solstice - Tiger hours, 2 kes in-between.

Mangzhong solar term

Xiaoshu solar term - Tiger hours, 3 kes in-between." [9, p. 102].

Accordingly, we can see that the time of sunrise during Summer solstice is 4:30 a.m.; during Mangzhong and Xiaoshu is 4:45 a.m. Zodiac hour terms are also used.

b. "Dai Nam Regulations" is a set of "regulation" books which records the regulations, norms and other data related to the operation of the entire Nguyen Dynasty ruling apparatus and comprises of 263 books (which were translated and reprinted into 8 volumes). Volume 259, volume 260 are devoted to the Directorate of Imperial Observatory, a department in the royal court which was in charge of calendars and meteorology. There were items related to calendar such as "Speculation", "Making of calendar", "Eclipse and lunar eclipse", "Thoughts and contemplation", "Choosing lucky days", "Time notifying". Regarding the classification of years, months, seasons and solar terms, the Nguyen Dynasty also used Chinese calendars in the time of the Ming and Qing dynasties with additional notes on the positions of the stars and on the weather phenomena in our land. Zodiac hour terms were also used: "Third year of Minh Mang's reign, exact quotation: on the first day of April of the year Xin Si (New Rat), the Qi Zheng stars converged in the area of Aries and Algenib, therefore at Dragon hours, ke one, fen three that day, the Sun, the Moon and Venus headed to Aries." [17, p. 550]. The Nguyen Dynasty also used the system of 96 "kes", each "ke" was equal to 15 minutes: "Besides, it's the Lichun solar term, the day has 46 kes, the night has 50 kes." [17, p. 554].

c. "Calendars and Vietnamese Calendar", by Hoang Xuan Han, was published in "Journal of Social Science", Paris, February 9, 1982. From page 795 to page 1023, (republished on nhatbook.com), regarding "ke", Hoang Xuan Han wrote the following: "The unit Day, from the previous midnight to the current midnight, is divided equally into 24 hours, namely 0 o'clock, 1 o'clock, and so on until 23 o'clock. Noon is 12 o'clock. While the noun Hour is familiar, I will refer to these parts of the day as a Modern Hour or Single Hour. A Modern Hour is divided into 60 minutes, each Minute is divided into 60 seconds. The 15-minute unit is named Ke; from now on I will call it Modern Ke "[10, p. 804-805]. (by calling it "modern ke", Hoang Xuan Han's intention was to distinguish it from the previous "ke" estimations of 12 minutes or 14 minutes 24 seconds as he wrote on page 806: "The noun Ke in the ancient Asian calendar means one hundredth of the day, which is 14 minutes and 24 seconds, so one fifth of a Single Hour is shorter than a Ke, which is 12 minutes. The origin of that noun is the markings in the bronze pool").

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d. As researched, in the records about or related to calendars from the Le, Nguyen Dynasties to the modern era, there is no mentioning of the ke unit as one-sixth of the day.

Hour, ke in early records

After researching about the ways to express time in early records, we decided to choose the following three documents, namely "Merits of the Nguyen Dynasty", (1719), by Nguyen Khoa Chiem, "Miscellaneous Chronicles of the Pacified Frontier", (1776), by Le Quy Don and "Travelog to Capital", (1781), by Le Huu Trac.

- "Merits of the Nguyen Dynasty" by Nguyen Khoa Chiem, a famous official of the Nguyen Dynasty, is a historical work that records various daily routines and uses many time-denoting words, but according to our observation, the author only uses zodiac hour terms, for example: " Day twenty-eight, Tiger hours, Mac Hong Ninh sent out troops..." [4, p. 44]. "At Horse hours, two generals sent out troops to fight." [4, p. 44]. "At Monkey hours, General, Duke Truong ordered to move out quickly." [4, p.44]. Occasionally, ways to roughly express time are used: "On day ten, at the middle of the morning, dark clouds suddenly appeared..." [4, p.340].

- In "Miscellaneous Chronicles of the Pacified Frontier", Le Quy Don used "ke" to indicate a short time period in the morning: "The new Cat palace at the entrance of Phuc Toan commune was built by Earl Thuy. The Nguyen family line's old residence is on the west side of Ai Tu river, to get there from the new palace, head to the main road, onto Ai Tu bridge, then go left for half a ke (...) On the east side of that river are the two communes of Dau Kinh and Hoa La." [8, p. 109]. In real life, Ai Tu is located on the bank of Thach Han River, so we think that Le Quy Don used "ke" in the sense of 15 minutes. To express a one-hour period, he used "half a geng" ("It takes half a geng to get to Bien Son isle", [8. p. 110]). The following are duration-denoting words in "Miscellaneous Chronicles of the Pacified Frontier" which were selected randomly: "day" (p. 101,102,107); "half a day" (p.108); "geng" (p. 108); "one and a half gengs" (p. 107, 101); "two gengs" (p.110); "three gengs" (p.111); "four gengs" (p.11); "five and a half gengs" (p.111). When writing about the waterways of Thuan Quang, he always used "geng" as a unit of time, whether it was about day or night.

- With "Travelog to Capital", we hoped that since the work is a travelog, the author will give us more information about time. Surprisingly, Hai Thuong Lan Ong did not use the zodiac hour terms but only used traditional time expressions; When writing about night, he used "geng". For example, "The boat only set out when the sun was about to set." [21. p. 11]; "We only depart after noon." (p. 13); "At geng two, Kinh Ky village, (...), let us stay, we will move on tomorrow morning. We will arrive at Nha Thon at noon." (p.91).

We looked up in some documents on Chinese and Vietnamese calendars and time expressions in some early records. The result confirms that in early calendars and records, there was no term "ke" in the sense of one sixth of the day. These grounds allow us to conclude that the statement "according to ancient saying" of some authors is not reliable. However, there is no denying the fact that in communicative language, the combination "five gengs a night, six kes a day" and related expressions exist, so how should we understand them?

DISCUSSION

Thus, until now, the combination "five gengs a night, six kes a day", apart from being included in some dictionaries, also appears in a verse of "Lament of a Royal Concubine" by Nguyen Gia Thieu: " Six kes a day waiting for the king – Five gengs a night only the bell rings" and the folk saying: " Five gengs a night my sorrow pours out - Six kes a day our vow goes on"

First of all, we again discuss the phrase "five gengs a night". According to Xu Li Li, the time-denoting word "geng" originated in ancient times: "Shi jing - Xiao ya described that there is 7 hours in the day and 5 hours in the night. It is also the origin of 5 gengs in the night that the next generations use" [16, p. 143]. The terms of "geng" in Vietnamese: geng one, geng two, geng three, geng four, geng five, all denote moments (in the sense of time duration, the syntax order is reversed: one geng, two gengs, three gengs, etc.). Corresponding to the five gengs are the zodiac hours: Dog - geng one, Pig - geng two, Rat - geng three, Ox - geng four, Tiger - geng five. What remains is, where did the above "six kes a day" expressions originate from?

- Until now, Vietnamese people still use the word "day" in both senses: i) "day" as daytime, often used in parallel with nighttime such as sunny day, rainy night; ii) "day" as a date, including daytime and nighttime. When expressing something that happens throughout the day, Vietnamese people still use the phrase (working) "from day until night", (not returning home) "from early morning until late night"; Working on the fields for a full day, from the time of morning dew until the night dew falls, is called "from sun until dew". To express something happening throughout the night, the expression "from twilight until morning" can be used.

- In the three examples above, "five gengs a night", "six kes a day" exist in two relations that are both serial and symmetrical. Serial: night - day; symmetrical: night - day; five - six, geng - ke. Regarding day and night, the symmetry exists in the perceptual characteristics: light - darkness, work - rest, active - inactive while for "five gengs a night" and "six kes a day", the symmetry exists in the literary characteristics. This leads to the possibility that "six kes a day", (along with "five gengs a night"), is just an expression that aims to satisfy the symmetrical characteristic of literature.

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- The above explanation only solves the basis of the existence of the phrase "six kes a day" in terms of structure and not semantics. In "five gengs a night, six kes a day", we have two noun phrases in an enumeration or symmetry relationship. Whereas, "night" and "day" are main nouns, "five gengs", "six kes" are post-modifiers or determiners. "Five gengs" modifies "night", "six kes" modifies "day". In reality, there are no six kes in the day, so they must be interpreted in a different sense. If "five gengs a night" can substitute (metonymously) for the duration and continuity of an event throughout the night, "six kes a day" can also substitute (metonymously) for the duration and continuity of an event throughout the day. In that case, can "six kes" metonymously denote the day?

We believe that On Nhu Hau - Nguyen Gia Thieu and other folk authors, in a Sinological environment, must have been aware that: “In the Qin and Han Dynasties prescribed that the 3 kes before sunrise are called “dan”, the 3 kes after sunset are called “hun”.” [16, p.145]. So from "dan" until "hun" is the same as from morning until night which is a full day and when "dan" and "hun" are combined, there are 6 kes in total! It can be concluded that "six kes a day" is a metonymy, a substitute for the period of morning until night. In this case, Nguyen Gia Thieu's verse can be interpreted as: From dawn until nightfall, the concubine restlessly waited for "someone" to come, but all night she only heard the bell signaling the next geng! She spent her days waiting and waiting.

CONCLUSION

- (1) Despite a number of variations for a long time on how to divide the number of kes in a day, the maximum is 120 and the minimum is 96, so a ke is 12 minutes at minimum and 15 minutes at maximum. "Ke" does not denote a longer duration.
- (2) According to our data, our ancestors did not divide the day into six kes. If we want to say "according to the division method of the ancient people", we must prove the theoretical basis of that method.
- (3) The phrase "six kes a day" exists in the Vietnamese language today thanks to two reasons, one is the symmetrical characteristic of literature, the other is the semantic characteristic or the metonymy structure that exists in every language.

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