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From Yue To Tai

Speakers of languages which are nowadays identified as part of a Tai linguistic family are found along a thousand kilometre arc from Guanxi to Assam. Earlier attempts to explain this spread were bound up with the search for the “origins” of a T(h)ai race, and worked from the model of an originally united and pure race which subsequently fragmented in the process of migration. More recent searches for an original Tai culture use a similar model.

Anthropologists and historians have attacked such models on the basis of both theory and observation of Tai societies over the past century. Ethnic groups are not blood-denominated groups but constructed social identities which evolve over time. Tai communities have a spectacular ability to absorb other peoples. The cultural variety among different Tai-speaking groups may exceed the differences between them and other neighbouring groups (Evans 1999; Turton 2000).

Yet the process by which this region became populated by communities speaking variants of this linguistic family is still of historical interest. Since the 1980s, the story of Tai migrations southward from the Altai mountains has

been discredited. Linguists identify the origin of the Tai language family in southwestern China. A school of historians in both China and Thailand links the Tai to the peoples in sub-Yangzi China which early Chinese texts generically call Yue (Ye, Yueh, Yüeh, etc). In this essay, I attempt to reconstruct the dispersion of Tai-speaking communities. I argue that the process must be seen as more complex than warrior migrations or cultural diffusion.

I begin by looking briefly at the historiography of Tai “origins”. I then summarise some linguistic theory on language spread, and use it to re-examine the evidence for the dispersion of Tai languages. In the remaining sections, I use Chinese texts, Tai chronicles and legends to suggest the pattern of movement, settlement, and contact with other peoples.

Tai Historiography

In the late nineteenth century, western travellers like A. R. Colquhoun noted the large number of Tai-speakers in southern China. In a preface written for Colquhoun’s book, *Amongst the Shans* (1885), the Sinologist Terrien de

Lacouperie (1885) speculated that the “Ngai–Lao” and “Ta Mung” found in Chinese texts of the second to fourth centuries AD might be forerunners of these peoples. In *The Tai Race* published posthumously in 1923, W. C. Dodd cited Lacouperie as his main source for an account that went far beyond Lacouperie’s tentative speculation. Dodd (1923, 4) wrote that the Tai had been “fixed residents in China, living under stable governments which endured for millenniums” before the Han arrival; were first recorded in Chinese texts in northwestern Sichuan in 2200 BC; subsequently moved south in seven “great migrations”; and arrived in Siam after the overthrow of their previous state of Nanchao. In *Lak Thai* (Origins of the Thai, 1928), Khun Wichitmatra adopted Dodd’s list of migrations (without attribution), and embroidered them with other speculations – including the thought that, before Dodd’s history, the Thai must have come from the Altai mountains because “that was the birthplace of the Mongols” (9–10). The rest is “history”. The story of the T(h)ais’ migration from the Altai mountains south through Nanchao to find a manifest destiny in the Chaophraya basin was written into school texts and academic histories.²

Dodd’s identification of Nanchao as a Tai state was soon challenged, particularly by Mote (1964), and finally demolished in the 1980s (Backus 1981; Vinai 1990). Two rival theories of T(h)ai origins then appeared to fill the gap.

Inspired by the discovery of Ban Chiang and other early archaeological sites within modern Thailand, Suchit Wongthet (1986) declared that “the Thais were [always] here”, meaning that even if some warriors had in-migrated with a new language, the majority of modern Thailand’s “ancestors” had been resident since the Bronze Age. The Sinlapa Wattanatham school (named after a magazine which Suchit edits) has constructed a history of Thailand which emphasises events which fall within the modern boundaries of Thailand – Ban Chiang, Dvaravati, Ayutthaya, Bangkok. Srisak Walipodom (Srisakra Vallibhotama) (1978, 88) wrote:

I think the study of Thai history should focus on the present–day territory of Thai-

land since ancient times-how several peoples gradually joined together as polities, as kingdoms, and finally as a country with a common culture called Thai culture.

In the early 1990s, Suchit and colleagues went on an enjoyable visit to the Zhuang in Guangxi. They were impressed first, that the Zhuang and Thai languages were so close that they could communicate easily, and second that the Zhuang’s cliff paintings, because they looked rather like European cave paintings, were proof of the Zhuang’s great antiquity. On return, Suchit (1994) modified his headline to “the Thais were always here in Southeast Asia”, and speculated that the Tai migration away from the Zhuang cousins must have occurred as early as the Bronze Age so that all subsequent Thai history was still contained within the modern national boundaries.

The second theory began among Chinese historians, especially Jiang Ng Liang whose *Tai ju su* (On the Thai nation, 1983) identified the Yue in early sub-Yangzi China as the forerunners of the Tai.³ Jiang’s theories were accepted by mainstream Chinese historiography, and expanded by other historians including Wang Hui Kun and Chen Lufan. Jiang’s book was translated into Thai in 1986 and embroidered by a “Yue school” of Thai historians. This school appeared as China emerged from Maoism, diplomatic and familial links between China and Thailand were restored, and Thailand’s Sino-Thai-dominated urban economy began to expand. Chen Lufan (1990) explained that the new theory superceded the story of successive migrations impelled by Chinese aggression, and was proof of the two countries’ eternal friendship. Thai historians with Chinese family origins were undoubtedly warmed by the thought that “Thais” and “Sino-Thais” enjoyed similar origins and had only timed their migration rather differently.

Language

The dominant model in historical linguistics has been the family tree. Members of a particu-

lar language family are assumed to have developed from a single origin – the proto language. Linguists endeavour to reconstruct the proto language, and trace how it developed through a series of splits. In this vein, Li Fang Kuei published a “tentative classification” of Tai languages in 1960, and then a fuller reconstruction of Proto-Tai in 1977 (Li 1960, 1977). By comparing the complexity of development to the much better attested development of European languages, linguists agreed that the fragmentation of Proto-Tai began “less than two millennia” ago (Diller 2000, 14-5). On grounds that language families show the greatest intensity of variation around their point of origin, William Gedney located the origin of Proto-Tai around the intersection between Yunnan, Vietnam, and Guangxi (Gedney 1964; Hartmann 1980, 73). Several historical linguists have traced the subsequent development of the Tai languages through a series of splits (see below). Historical anthropologists have speculated that the languages were spread by warrior-led migrant groups (e.g., Condominas 1976, 1990).

However, the ramification of language families from a single origin is not the whole story of linguistic development. Dixon (1997), for example, proposed a division into two basic models. First, in periods of equilibrium, languages in adjacent areas tend to exchange features and converge. These periods may last a long time. Second, at times of “punctuation” (meaning disruption), languages may split and spread in quite sudden and complex ways, and the family tree model applies. This “punctuation” may be caused by natural causes, new technologies, or political changes which prompt migration movements.

Evans (1999, 12-3) suggests that work such as Dixon’s questions the use of the family-tree model to trace the Tai language family. In fact, the Tai family seems to fit Dixon’s “punctuated equilibrium” rather well. Yet Dixon suggests some qualifications to the family-tree model which may be relevant. First, he notes that a language family “may have emanated not from

a single language, but from a small areal group of distinct languages, with similar structures and forms” (Dixon 1997, 98). In a similar way, the Thai linguist Anthony Diller (1990, 28), using the image of a piece of rope, proposed that the Proto-Tai culture was first formed by the convergence of different strands into a single rope, and then frayed again into several new strands.⁴ Second, Dixon dismisses the idea that the time-depth can be estimated by comparing to the European case because the natural environment and historical context might be quite different.

In addition, other linguists note that the pattern of successive branching in the visual representation of the family-tree model tends to obscure the fact that languages may spread in successive waves, and that in the process there may be exchange and convergence, both with other strands of the same language family, and with other languages in the same area.

Linguists have also looked beyond military colonisation for explanations why certain language families become dominant over a wide area. Renfrew (1997) argues that the big dispersions of language in early human history were associated mainly with agricultural changes.⁵ Groups with better ability to produce food may have higher population growth and thus incentives to migrate; or they may be able to support higher population densities and hence have greater military might; or they may absorb other language-speakers in peaceful ways. Political factors may be alternative or supplementary reasons to agricultural technology. Groups which face hardship (famine, oppression) in their original homeland may develop military capacity or social mechanisms which give them advantages over the local population when they migrate into a new area with more benign conditions (e.g., Nichols 1997, 1998).

These theoretical findings have several implications for reconstructing the spread of Tai languages. The origin may not be a single Proto-Tai language and its speakers, but a group. The time-depth of the fragmentation need not be two thousand years. The various dialects

may be created not solely by a succession of splits, but also by joins and exchanges between different groups. While warriors might pioneer the process of dispersion, technology and social organisation might be the underlying motive forces.

Yue

Since Gedney's first identification, Tai linguists have generally agreed on the language family's point of origin in the region around the Yunnan-Guangxi-Vietnam trisection. Some also link the Tai family with other language groups which survive further to the west in sub-Yangzi China.

Early Chinese records used the term Yue to describe the non-Chinese people south of the Yangzi. In the Spring and Autumn period (770-475 BC) the term was applied to a state on the south-eastern coast which was destroyed in 334 BC as the Han Chinese moved across the Yangzi into the south. Subsequently, the term "hundred Yue" was applied generically to the subjugated peoples in the south, with modifiers to denote groups in different locations or with some other distinguishing characteristic (Phornphan 1988). The term Yue fades from usage around 0 AD as the Chinese gained more knowledge of the southern peoples and began using other descriptors (Barlow 2001, chs. 1-2; Taylor 1983, 41-4). None of the modern terms used for Tai groups can be detected in these descriptors except Lao or Ailao which was applied to a variety of groups, mostly hill-dwellers (Taylor 1983, 172; Cholthira 2001, 22-4).

Historians of the Yue school draw attention to some characteristics of the exotic southerners as noted in the early Chinese texts and sometimes confirmed by archaeology: they cultivated rice, built stilt houses without nails, tattooed their bodies, cut their hair short, decorated their teeth, were expert weavers, cultivated silkworms, used bronze drums in rituals, adopted snakes, frogs and birds as totems, practised spirit possession, divined with chicken bones, liked antiphonal singing, put women to work, and resided with

the wife's family. On the basis of the similarity to contemporary practices among Tai groups, scholars of the "Yue school" select sub-groups of the Yue and claim them as "ancestors" (*banphaburut*) of the Tai (i.e., as the Proto-Tai).⁶

But many of these characteristics survive not only in Tai societies, but also in other societies of the region (Barlow 2001, chs. 2-4; Cholthira 2001, 225-36; Somphong 2001, 234; Turton 2000). It makes better sense to conceive of "Yue" as a broad and very varied cultural zone, from which many different elements "precipitated out" as a result of the entry of the Han Chinese into the zone over more than a millennium.

From around the fourth century BC, the Han Chinese began moving across the Yangzi. In 221 BC, the emperor Shih Huang-ti rounded up "criminals, banished men, social parasites and merchants" and sent five armies totalling half-a-million men to conquer the south (Wang 1958, 10 quoting *Shih Chi*; Taylor 1983, 17-8). The main targets were the coastal ports where rich profits could be made by sending exotic goods to the north. Around 200 BC, the Chinese took Panyu, the main port on the Pearl River estuary, from a Yue chief. Over the next century they established nine ports and military centres stretching westwards along the coast to the Red River delta, obliterating at least four Yue polities in the process.

But consolidating control took a long time. The northern armies had low resistance to tropical disease. On average around a quarter or a third died on campaign, and some armies were totally obliterated.⁷ Emperors could not afford this too often. Hence the south was absorbed slowly over many centuries by migration and acculturation, punctuated by occasional armed invasions. Settlers, merchants, and administrators flowed into the south, particularly at times of dynastic decline and political disorder in the north. In the early fourth century, for example, "vast throngs of Chinese refugees fled south" away from "marauding nomadic peoples of the northern frontier" (Taylor 1983, 99). After the Tang collapse in

the tenth century, noble families migrated south with hordes of armed retainers (Ramsey 1987, 33). Sometimes these migrants seized land. But they also tended to marry and blend into the local population, creating the hybrid languages and cultures along the coastal strip.⁸

Meanwhile, in many cases as in 221 BC, “the Yüeh people fled into the depths of the mountains and forests, and it was not possible to fight them” (Taylor 1983, 18, quoting the *Huai nan tzu*). As the Chinese consolidated control along the coast, those resisting integration moved away into the interior, particularly into the high valleys among the mountains in an arc running west and south from Nanning around the rear of the Red River delta. The Chinese gradually set up garrisons and provincial administrations in the hills to control these peoples, but faced constant resistance. In 722, for example, some 400,000 “Lao” and “Nan Yue” rose in revolt, and the leader declared himself king of Nan Yue (Taylor 1983, 178, 192-3). From the sixth century onwards, the Chinese coastal settlements occasionally called on help from imperial armies to conduct pacification campaigns on this hill frontier. After the 722 revolt, some 60,000 were beheaded. In a pacification campaign in the ninth century, designed to secure the route through to the Nanchao kingdom in Yunnan, the

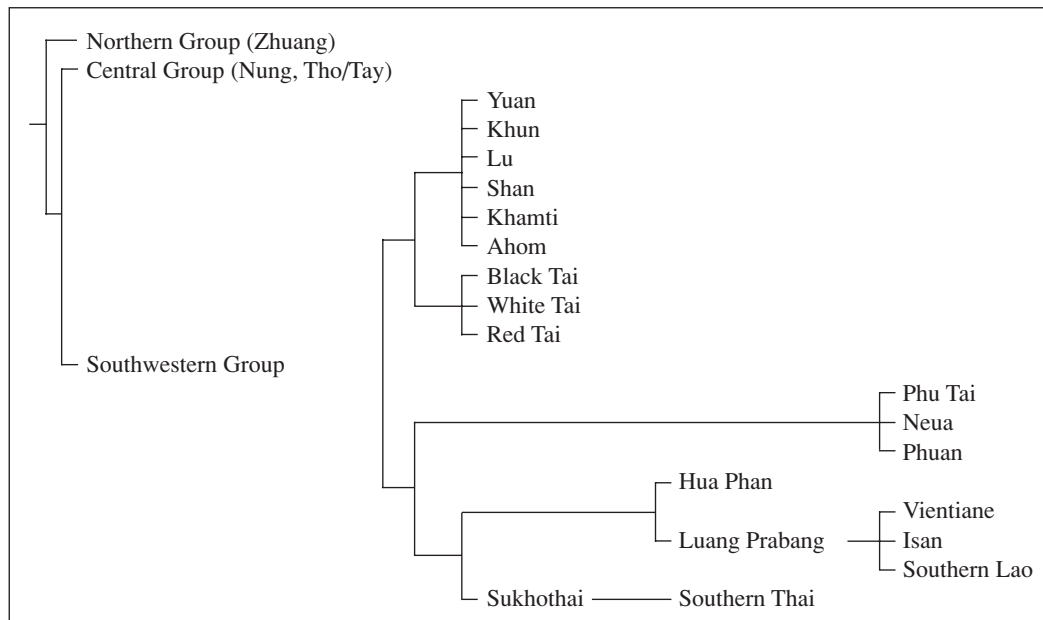
imperial armies beheaded 30,000 rebels in the course of a bloody campaign (Taylor 1983, 239-49).

In sum, over more than a millennium, the old Yue of the south developed in (at least) two directions. Some were absorbed into the hybrid societies and states of the coast stretching from the Yangzi estuary to the Red River delta. Others were pushed into the interior hills by armed invasions and immigration waves, and occasionally battered by frontier pacification campaigns. These latter were probably the mechanism which pushed people westwards.

Little is known about the languages of the Yue. The Chinese called them “bird speech”, twittering.⁹ One Yue song was transcribed into the records in Chinese characters. This song remained unintelligible until a linguist managed to interpret it using reconstructed Proto-Tai (Zhengzhang 1991). Subsequently it was also interpreted using old Cantonese and Cham (Wade, personal communication). The Yue have many descendants.

Dispersion

Chamberlain (1975, 1986, 1989, 1991, 1992, 1998a, 1998b) has been the most ambitious in attempting to construct a family tree of Tai languages and dialects.¹⁰ Figure 1 is a simpli-



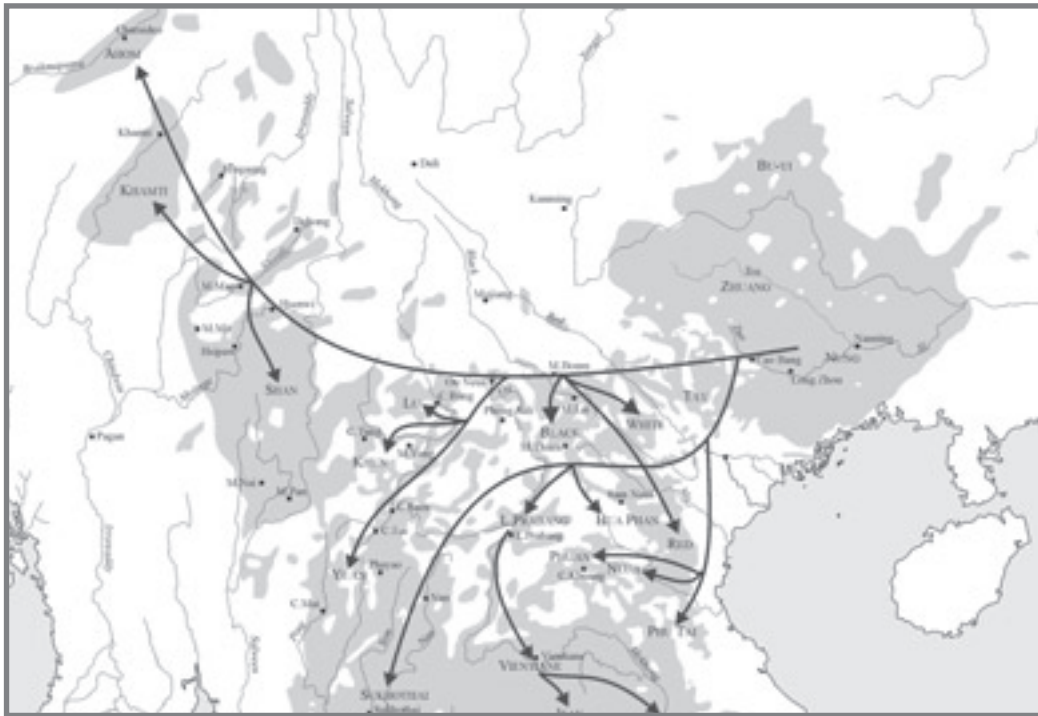
fied and synthesised version of his work. Chamberlain has also tried to match the critical splits on this family tree with political events that divided peoples and spurred migration. He suggests that Proto-Tai was separated from neighbouring languages by the Han military push around 330 BC which broke up the polities just south of the Yangzi and propelled people south and west (Chamberlain 1998b, 4-5). A division into three groups then took place before 0 BC. Both the “central group” of Tai languages (including Nung, Tay/Tho) and “northern group” (including Zhuang) are found in the mountain areas behind the early coastal states. The third “southwestern” group is scattered westwards across the hill ranges dividing China from mainland Southeast Asia, with southern spurs along the valleys of the Mekong and Chaophraya river systems. The division into dialects within this southwestern group is highly complex.

In the light of newer language theory, Chamberlain’s chronology should probably be loosened.¹¹ Trade and cultural flows along the route between the Red River delta and Yunnan

(either along the river or across the plain to its north) are very old, attested by the distribution of distinctive corded pottery, “bean pots”, three-legged jars, and the Dongson bronze drums (Meacham 1983). Successive migrations and language shifts may have occurred along this trajectory over a long period. But it is likely, as Chamberlain argues, that Han pressure created the “punctuation” for more dramatic change.

The dispersion of Tai languages across the hills took place over a millennium or more. It was not linear or regular. Although the overall trend was westward, there were many sidetracks and reversals. Other peoples were moving into the same region over the same era from different directions. Tibeto-Burman peoples from the northwest were filtering into Burma and Yunnan (Driem 1998). The Viets may have expanded northwards into the Red and Black river region (Chamberlain 1998a, 37-44). Chinese filtered south by many routes.

Map 1 shows the modern distribution of Tai languages.¹² The arrows show Chamberlain’s “family tree” overlain on the map. The arrows do not show migration routes (which were much





more complex). But combining the map and the “family tree” suggests that Chamberlain’s division of the Tai languages makes some sense, and hints at the main trends of movement. In the historical record – Chinese texts and local legends – we get glimpses which help to fill in more detail on routes and timing. Five streams or phases of movement can be glimpsed in these records.

The earliest of these streams moved first to the northwest. According to Chinese scholars, people moved along this route before 0 BC (Tan 1994).¹³ They became part of the various kingdoms - Dian, Nanchao, Piao - which appeared on the southwestern frontier of Han expansion. They were not the core people of these states (who were probably Tibeto-Burman) but more likely settlers, slaves, and soldiers. Chinese scholars believe some arrived in Yunnan from the southeast; but others came from the north as refugees from the warring states on the middle Yangzi. Some of these groups seem later to have moved south along the rivers, especially the Irawadi and Salween. Chinese scholars detect early development of communities around the Salween area perhaps from the first century AD, including a “kingdom of riding elephants”. By the ninth century, the Chinese call the barbarians around the upper Salween and Mekong the “Mang Man”, and note that their chief was called “mang-chao”, and that “they live in pile-propped houses”. The Chinese classified the various *man* barbarians of this area into those with gold, silver, or black teeth, and those with tattooed legs or faces (Luce 1961, 42-3).

The Shan chronicles record the first migrations south from Yunnan into the Shweli River region in a period estimated around the sixth century (Sai Aung Tun 2000). Foundation legends of some Shan towns also relate westward movements through the Shan area around the same era – from the Mekong westwards across the Salween, and then to the Shweli (Renu 1998). The *Yuan shi* records that at the end of the eighth century, the Nanchao ruler attacked southern Yunnan, “defeated the hordes of barbarians (*qunman*), captured all of their people

and [moved them] to populate the south, east, and north of his territory”; but when the Nanchao kingdom disintegrated in the tenth century, these people “regained their former lands” (Daniels 2000, 69-70). The Mongol scribes who documented Yunnan in the thirteenth century identified several groups including many “gold teeth” and the Bai-yi (or Pai-i, white barbarians or white clothes) who “flourish the most amongst the barbarians of the south-west”. They were especially concentrated between the Salween and Irawadi (the M. Mao area), but were found along an arc stretching from Tibet to the Red River delta and their “customs are generally the same” (Daniels 2000, 71 from *Yuan Shi*, see also Luce 1959, 60).

In sum, there seems to have been a movement along the northern-most branch of Chamberlain’s tree-first up into lower Yunnan, then southward down the rivers-which began from the period of Han expansion along the south Chinese coastal plain, and continued sporadically over many centuries. By the thirteenth century, the Chinese are identifying a dominant group in this area with a descriptor (Bai-yi) which is later applied to the Shan.¹⁴

A second stream may have begun from the same disturbed period, and initially moved westwards into the hills circling the Red River delta. Petty polities appeared including one at Cao Bang ruled by lords named Lac or Lo (Taylor 1983, ch. 1; Chamberlain 1998b, 5). These polities were occasionally pressured or absorbed by the Han, but some rebelled and remained independent. This area was disturbed again around the seventh or eighth century when Viet groups began to expand northwards into the delta, and when the Han conducted frontier pacification campaigns. They seem to have moved northwest towards Yunnan, and then down into the valleys of the Red and Black rivers. The name Lac or Lo is preserved as the name of the noble lineage among some groups of Black Tai. Cam Trong (1998, 20-1) traces the Black and White Tai moving south into the area of the Red, Black and Ma rivers over the eighth to thirteenth centuries.



A third stream can be dated more exactly around the eleventh century. During the earlier Han expansion, some Yue groups took refuge in the area between the You and Zuo rivers in Guanxi. They were attacked by the Han, the Viet, and by raids from Nanchao, but were protected by the terrain described by Chinese officials as “steep mountains and inaccessible valleys”. Their chiefs developed a strong military system and the Chinese reported respectfully that the people “loved to fight and struggle and regarded death lightly” (Barlow 1987, 255). In the 1040s, one clan led by a powerful matriarch-shamaness (A Nong), her chiefly husband, and their son (Nong Zhi-gao) extended their rule to fourteen valleys, raised a revolt, and declared the founding of a state using Chinese political vocabulary and symbols. In 1052, the Nong rebels swept westwards, took Nanning, besieged Guangzhou for fifty-seven days, and slew the commanders of five Chinese armies sent against them. Finally they were defeated, and many of the leaders killed (Barlow 1987; He 1998; Hoang 1988; Anderson 2001). The clans who had not joined this ambitious uprising were subjected to Chinese acculturation. Some of the rebels filtered back to their earlier home. Others fled deeper into the hills. Clans which use the name Nong and claim descent from the rebels are settled around the Yunnan-Guangxi-Vietnam borderland. Others who retain Nong as a clan name and who remember the rebellion in oral legends, settled in Sipsongpanna, Lanna, and Dehong (He 1998, 93-4). The Lu, Yuan and Dehong dialects from these areas contain words and constructions found elsewhere only among the Zhuang who continue to live in Guanxi (He 1998, 97; Pan 1990; Luo 2001).

A fourth phase of movement seems to have occurred west of the Salween from the eleventh to fourteenth century. M. Mao¹⁵ emerged as an ambitious new capital which rose to a peak in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries (Zhou and Ke 1990; Sao Saimong Mangrai 1965). Many new migrants arrived, and many towns were founded or refounded (Sao Hso Hom and Pu Loi Tun, 1998; Somphong 2001, 25). These develop-

ments were then disrupted by the Mongol efforts to capture Pagan. Khublai Khan took Tali in 1253, and sent a first expedition south in the following year. In the 1260s, the Mongols created a corridor through to the upper Irawadi. After Pagan’s failed pre-emptive northern expedition in 1277, the Mongols forged south, recruiting the Pai-i as troops. One expedition claimed it “registered 110,200 households” (Luce 1958, 133). Luce argues that the Mongol invasions of Pagan in 1277-8 and 1283-4 precipitated Shan expansion westward. The legends of M. Mao and Mogaung tell of their rulers extending their power eastwards to the Mekong, northwards into Yunnan, and westwards to Arakan, Manipur, and Assam (Sao Hso Hom and Pu Loi Tun, 1998; Sao Saimong Mangrai 1965). According to the Ahom Buranji (chronicle), one chief, Sukupha, moved his base from M. Mao via M. Mit, and finally over the hills into the Brahmaputra valley in thirteen years of wandering. Gait (1994, 73) times this crossing very exactly to 1228, but a solar eclipse mentioned in the Buranji suggests a date some two centuries later (Diller 1992, 10). In the Ming records, there is a flurry of reports in 1406 about an expansive state in the southwest named Da Gu-la; this might mark the Ahom migration and settlement in the Brahmaputra valley (Wade 1994, 301-2, 4567). Another group from Mogaung/M. Mao moved west to the Chindwin. The name Khamti, subsequently applied to the dialect, had been a clan name in M. Mao (Sao Hso Hom and Pu Loi Tun, 1998). Luce (1958, 14, 174 fn. 10) says this settlement does not appear in the Chinese surveys until 1400.

A fifth phase of disruption and movement occurred around the Mekong. It may have begun during the Nanchao-Tali wars in the twelfth century, and climaxed after the Mongols turned their attention to this area at the end of the thirteenth century. The legends of the Lu, Khun, and Yuan relate movements to found new settlements in the few generations before these accounts break into historical time in the late thirteenth century. The dating is far from precise, but the freshness of the stories suggest they



relate to quite recent events, perhaps from the tenth or eleventh centuries onwards.¹⁶ These movements seem to be south from Yunnan along the Mekong River, and then southwards again along the valleys of the Kok, Ping, and other rivers. A Mongol survey of Yunnan's southern border announced "there were about 200,000 people longing for civilisation and anxious to submit" (Luce 1958, 147). In 1292, Mongol troops attacked Pa-pai-hsi-fu (Lanna) and demolished the city gates (Luce 1959, 72). Ch'eli (Chiang Rung) was taken in 1296 and established as a military outpost. But the area remained rebellious and difficult to control. The Mongol court ordered armies south in 1297, 1301, 1303, 1309, 1311, and 1312, but not all these expeditions took place. The 1301-2 campaign resulted in a mutiny, the "ruin of the army", and subsequent execution of the Chinese military commander (Luce 1958, 165-6; 1959, 77-80). The 1312 effort collapsed because of "pestilence and other hardships" (Chen 1949, 9). Mongol officials argued that the mountains, forests, malaria, and supply difficulties meant the military losses outweighed any gains.¹⁷ After 1312, Che'li and Pa-pai-hsi-fu sent tribute (tame elephants) in return for which the Mongols left them largely alone (Luce 1958, 164-71; Hsieh 1995, 308-9). In these few decades of warfare, peoples settled along the Mekong and its northern tributaries were pushed south.¹⁸ The Yonok rulers at Chiang Saen moved south along the Kok and Ping, and relocated their capital to Chiang Rai and then Chiang Mai (1296). The Kaeo rulers moved their capital southwards down the Nan River in the early fourteenth century (Sratsawadi 1996, 86-91). The infant Fa Ngum went south to Cambodia in the 1310s for mysterious reasons, and later returned to found the Lanxang capital at Luang Prabang (Stuart-Fox 1998, 37-8). The Tay moved south-eastwards from Yunnan back into Guangxi (Barlow 2001, ch. 7).

These sketches suggest waves of migration out from southern China, propelled by successive phases of Han and Viet aggression, over a period running from at least the third century

BC to the eleventh century AD. Mostly these movements seem to have followed the north-westerly route into lower Yunnan, and then southwards along the river systems into the hills. Movements on the more southerly routes into the Annamite hills and onwards to the middle Mekong are much less clear.¹⁹ Further, these sketches suggest a phase, possibly begun by the expansion of Piao Pagan, and certainly intensified by the Mongol intrusion after 1270, when people were splayed to the west and the south.²⁰

Passages

This dispersion was not a simple, linear process. It was made up of thousands of short-distance moves by relatively small groups of people. Some of the legends talk of chiefs leading bands of a few thousand. The Ahom Buranji says that Sukapha was accompanied by eight nobles, nine thousand people, two elephants, and three hundred horses (Gait 1994, 73). Some talk of a handful of families. Some relate the story of only a single pioneer, couple, or pair of brothers. In some places, the legends recount a single time of foundation and settlement. Elsewhere the picture is more complex. The M. Mao/Mogaung legends tells of three successive influxes of Tai peoples (Sao Hso Hom and Pu Loi Tun, 1998; Sao Saimong Mangrai 1965). Some of the legends portray several moves interrupted by pauses. The Black Tai move south to settle around M. Boum on the Black River, and then some two centuries later moved on to M. Thaen (Cam Trong 1998, 20-1; Chamberlain 1991; Phatthiya 2001, 147-53). In one Chinese text, the migrant Tai "move in large numbers to the far southern tropical forest along the mountain chains and rivers". Occasionally they settle but "it was not long before they began a new movement every five or ten years" (Wang 1990, 5).

Luo (2001, 185-6) finds that the Tai in Dehong, Sipsongpanna use many common words from the "northern" Tai dialects, but pronunciation similar to the "southwestern" group. He hypothesises that refugees from the



Nong revolt moved first into the Red-Black rivers area where their pronunciation changed towards that of earlier settlers, and then later moved on northwards to Dehong.

The “family tree” portrayal of the language development and the migratory pattern is misleading in one important way. It shows the splits. It does not show the mergers and joins. As in Luo’s example, both the dialects and the dialect groups were formed by mingling of various migrant streams. Chinese scholars’ efforts to trace the origins of Tai communities in Yunnan identify migrations coming southwards from the Yangzi valley and “cold regions” beyond, as well as peoples arriving from the south-east along the Red and Black rivers (Wang 1990; Liu 1999). Similarly, some legends of Luang Prabang describe the early inhabitants arriving down the Nam Ou from the Plain of Jars, while another version records the foundation of M. Sua in the Luang Prabang area by a betelnut merchant moving up the Mekong (Stuart-Fox 1998, 19-20). The Shan legends have movements shuttling up and down the river systems to and from Yunnan, as well as streams arriving from the west. The foundation legends of the Yuan have groups coming both up the Mekong from the south-east, and down the Mekong from Yunnan, as well as westwards from the Shan States probably propelled by Piao, Nanchao, and Mongol raids. Throughout the migration, groups from the south-west were merging with other migrants which may have had very different origins.

Search

Did Tai-speakers come to dominate through this area because they were warriors, or did they carry with them some agricultural advance or social assets? The evidence is inevitably indirect. But the dominant motif in the foundation legends of many Tai muang is a migration in search of good riceland.²¹

The Tai migrations probably did not introduce rice to the hill tier. Indeed, according to some scholars, rice was first domesticated in this

region (Chang 1993; Watabe 1998). The earliest evidence of intense rice cultivation, however, comes from the lower Yangzi valley around the seventh millennium BC. From there, the technology seems to have spread slowly (though this may simply reflect the limited extent of archaeological research). The earliest dates for cultivated rice in the Mekong basin fall in the late third millennium BC (Glover and Higham 1996; Bellwood 1996).²²

The Tai migrants may have brought not rice itself but better ways to grow it through water control. Early Chinese visitors to the Yue area south of the Yangzi were fascinated by the intricacy of rice-growing. One poem by Cheng Heng (78-139 AD) about the Tung Yueh region describes water management for paddy and intense garden cultivation:

From the streams
Tunnels have been bored that lead the
rushing current
Flowing into these ricefields,
Where channels and ditches link like
arteries,
Dikes and embankments web with one
another;
Dawn clouds need not rise up
The stored waters find their way alone,
And when the sluices are opened, they
drain away,
So that the fields are now flooded, now
dry again,
And the winter rice, the summer wheat
Ripens each in its proper season.
In the broad meadows
Are mulberry, lacquer trees, hemp, and
ramie,
Beans, wheat, millet, and paniced millet,
A hundred grains, thick and luxuriant,
Burgeoning, ripening.
In garden plots
Grow smartweed, fragrant grasses,
turmeric,
Sugar cane, ginger, garlic,
Shepherd’s purse, taro, and melons
(Daniels 1996, 182).



The groups pushed into the mountain valleys of Guanxi seem to have developed special methods of water management. They grew rice around karst outcrops which absorbed rain-water and slowly released it as run-off. They used dikes, retention dams, bamboo pipes, stone-lined ditches, and lifting devices for managing water. They chose settlement sites on flat land between mountain slope and river (Barlow 2001, ch. 2.1).²³

The heroic foundation legend of many Tai settlements tells of a leader moving through the hills in search of a flat well-watered plain - the ideal spot to support a large population of rice-growers. One of the most eloquent legends is the Black Tai *Khvam to muang*. In the opening section, the earth is separated from the heavens, and the sky god cleanses the earth by drought and flood. The god then populates the world with people and animals (buffalo, ox, pig, horse, and deer). Amongst the people are two “ancestors” who have several children. Six sons go off to rule existing *muang*, leaving the seventh son.

This last child had no ricefield
 This latter child had no muang
 And so accompanied by his family, Khun
 Lo, Khun Leuang, Khun Kwang
 Khun Tong, and Khun Leo
 He set forth to establish a territory of his
 own.

This takes a long time. They raft across rivers, climb mountains, and scale cliffs. The first place is too small. The next has a sacred cave which is attractive, but again the space for growing rice is too limited. The next is well-defended by mountains, but still too small. The next is on a slope and the water is bad. “It was high and cold, a good place but not for Tais”. In each case “the ancestor would not accept it”. Then they hear of a “wide and spacious valley, with great fields all adjacent, a good place, with fertile paddies on either side”. Eventually,

Swinging their arms
 They were not yet tired
 And their destination was near
 They descended on Muang Theng.
 Muang Theng was round like a winnow-
 ing basket,
 A valley gently curved as a buffalo horn.
 It was a good place, wide, with ricefields
 on either side,
 A desirable place where thousands could
 live.
 The Ancestors founded Muang Theng
 (Chamberlain 1992).

This legend records the foundation of M. Thaen (Dien Bien Phu). The same theme of the itinerant seventh son appears in the foundation legends of many other places. The details vary. In another version of the same Black Tai legend, the sky god populates the world not only with humans and animals, but also with “everything indispensable for life” including 330 types of rice, and books teaching about divination and magic (Roux 1954, 377). The journey includes boat trips along rivers, and treks through deep forests. One of the places found has beautiful women, but is still too small to be suitable. At another, the water courses are too full of rocks. At another, the local people are too tormented. Another is plagued by vicious yellow-winged bees. Eventually they find a broad plain suitable for rice.

In the Sinhanavati story from Lanna, the ruler has thirty sons and despatches twenty-nine to found new *muang*. Sinhanavati travels south to the Mekong and rejoices in a location “with many water courses of all dimensions” (Notton 1926, Sinhanavati, 143). In the Suvanna Khomkham story from Lanna, a banished prince finds a new settlement along the Mekong where “Heavenly rain made the country flourish. The ricefields produced abundant harvests and nothing was lacking.” (Notton, 1926, Suvanna K’om Kham, 116).

In another popular theme, the Tai hero is out hunting, and is led on a long chase by a golden deer. The deer seems lame and easy to

catch but always evades the hunter, leading him eventually to a beautiful place. In some versions, the hunter then has lunch, and the seeds from his garlic and onions fall on the ground and start growing. In other versions he meets a rishi who convinces him to build a city, and indicates clumps of lotus which will produce enough rice to feed a big population (Sao Saimong Mangrai 1981, 224-8; Notton, 1926, Yonok, 1-13).

The key plot elements about seven sons, a flighty deer, a helpful rishi, and plants which start growing of their own accord, recur in different combinations with different local details through many of these legends. Common to all versions are the themes of arduous travel, the search for broad well-watered plains suitable for rice production, and success marked by spontaneous or spectacular fertility.

The places chosen as the major settlements have a similar topography. They are large basins, often at a confluence, where the rivers have created a broad alluvial plain. The surrounding mountains provide defense. Streams flowing from the hills down to the main river can be diverted for irrigation. The river offers a secondary reason why such a site is attractive: trade. One Tai poem lists several *muang*, some which have good rice yield, some which have “fruit orchards and coconut groves”, and another where the ruler “can collect a great deal of tribute because it is a trading centre with many markets” (Chamberlain 1992, 18-19, 29-30). The Sipsongpanna chronicles describes an exchange of tribute between two related centres. One seems to have a craft industry and sends golden and silver howdahs, a golden water-carrier, embroidered mattresses, and blankets. The other appears less developed and reciprocates with horses, cattle, mules, steel swords, and salt (Ratanaporn 1998, 118). After the Tai chase the Akha into the hills, the Akha still return to the valleys to trade. In their texts, “The lowland scene is represented as a large river which has to be crossed, a valley, and ... markets where the Akha go to buy and sell” (Alting 2000, 138).

Across the hill ranges from the Red River to the Brahmaputra, there were several places where the ecological conditions were right, and where the settlements became large and politically central: M. Lai (Lai-chau) and M. Boum on the Black River; M. Thaeng (Dien Bien Phu); Luang Phrabang, Chiang Saen, and Chiang Rung (Jinghong) on the Mekong; M. Pan and M. Nai on tributaries of the Salween; Hsipaw and Hsenwi on the Myitnge; M. Mao on the Shweli; Mogaung on the upper Irawadi; Khamti on the upper Chindwin; and Charaideo on the Brahmaputra. Even the settlements which branched south into the plains retain some memory of this ideal landscape. Sukhothai, Kamphaeng Phet, and Champassak are situated on flat ground between hill and river, though if the eyes turn south there is no longer hills but only a flat expanse.

Originals

Another constant theme of these legends is that the Tai are not the first pioneers: others were there before them.

Throughout these stories the itinerant land-seeking Tai come across peoples that are variously called Kha, Khamu, Thamin, Milaku, Sa, Wa, Lawa, Laha, and Meng. They are often described as dark-skinned. Most of these were probably Mon-Khmer speakers, as small groups using the same names still exist, usually living on the hills or in the forests throughout mainland Southeast Asia.²⁴ Daniels (2000, 62) notes that several Mon-Khmer polities survived in Yunnan until the seventeenth century.

In the Tai legends, sometimes these early settlers are described as living on the hill slopes and in the forests. The first contacts with the Tai are about exchange of products. In the Phayao and Doi Tung *tamnan*, the first ruler is a “Tamila” called Lawa Cok. He is an expert silversmith and metalworker. His people grow “rice, beans, peas, sesame, galangal, ginger, gourds, marrows, cucumber, water-gourd, pumpkins, and maize” on the hill slopes. They bring these products down “to the foot of the



northern mountains” to exchange with the Tai for “meat, fish, betel nuts, leaves and salt” (Aroonrut 2000; Cholthira 1997). Izikowitz (1981, 104) notes that many Tai centres along the Mekong are situated at the confluence of tributaries (like the Ou) which facilitate trade with the people deeper in the forests and hills.

But in many cases these earlier peoples occupy the same broad valleys which attract the Tai. Indeed, one thing which makes a site a good place to end their migration is that it is “well peopled” and already has “paddy fields on both sides of the river” (Roux 1954, 379 from a Black Tai legend). The site chosen for Chiang Mai, for example, was earlier occupied by three or four Lawa settlements (Sratsawadi 1996; Aroonrut 2000; Daniels 2000, 59). In some versions of the Doi Tung story, the Lawa chief brings his people down to the riverine plain to found Ngoen Yang and later confronts the Tai (Ratanaporn 1998; Sratsawadi 1996, 37-40). In another Lanna legend, a Lawa mountain chief announces, “We are too many and we occupy the whole mountain. There is no more space to cultivate. We must go down into the dry region and the thick forest.” They clear forest, build a moated settlement fed by a natural stream, and live well on rice and fish. The Chinese attack without success. In old age, the Lawa chief returns to the hill and the settlement is abandoned. Later the Tai come and reoccupy the site (Notton 1926, Mahathera Fa Bot).

Contact I: War

In these stories, the encounters between the Tai and the earlier inhabitants are resolved in two ways. In the first, there is conflict and the earlier inhabitants are dispersed into the hills.

In the Kengtung legend, the first settlers are Chinese, but the local spirits announce, “We do not like the Chinese and are opposed to the construction of the city by them,” so the rice will not grow properly and the Chinese leave. Then 80,000 Palaung Wa arrive under eight chiefs, start growing roots and yams, and build a city with a moat and twelve gates. The Chinese now

demand tribute but are sent packing. A splendid Palaung ruler emerges who “constructed villages and towns, demarcated boundaries, appointed ministers and officials to rule over provinces, small and big... ruling over one million paddy fields”. Eventually a Tai chief arrives. He cannot defeat the Palaung by force, but catches them out with a trick, kills their ruler, and chases them away. The Palaung move off to Mongkha and build a new town. But the Tai come again while they are still digging the moat, and this time the Palaung are scattered into the hills (Sao Saimong Mangrai 1981, 201-3, 214-8). In the Chiang Saen legend, the Lawa chief accepts ten thousand pieces of gold to hand over his people to the Tai. He retires to live on the hill of Doi Tung from where his ancestors had come (Notton 1926, Sinhanavati, 171-5).

In another story, two brothers lead the Black Tai down the Red River to settle on the broad plain at M. Lo. Two generations later, Cheung, the youngest of seven sons, sets out in the usual seventh-son way. First he crosses the mountains to the Red River, attacks a Kha settlement unsuccessfully, then returns with a bigger army and succeeds. He and his followers colonise along the river, eventually arriving at a fine but already occupied valley. They try to claim possession by force but fail because the existing Laha inhabitants are fierce. They ask the local chief’s permission to take up residence so they can observe the local habits. Later Cheung asks to marry the chief’s daughter. At the wedding feast, the Laha chief brings fifty bodyguards, displaying a conspicuous lack of trust. But these guards are persuaded to stack their weapons and proceed to get drunk. The Tai seize the opportunity to kill the local chief. His daughter is rendered speechless by this treachery, and the other Laha run away in fright. After more colonising along the Black River, Cheung crosses the hills into the Ma valley, and then branches out southwest across the hills to the Ou and other tributaries of the Mekong. Finally he retraces his route to M. Thaen which is already a thriving settlement of Black Tai and Kha, where he becomes chief. This story traces

a movement first southeast down from lower Yunnan, then southwest across the ridges dividing the Black, Red and Ma rivers, and finally beyond into the watershed of the Mekong. All along the route, the Tai create new *muang* along the river valleys, often encountering resistance from earlier settlers. Cam Trong estimates Cheung's journeying took twenty years, and places the events in the eleventh or twelfth century (Phatthiya 2001, 147-52; Chamberlain 1992, 67-8).

The most dramatic of these stories of conflict is found in an epic poem. The name Cheung appears to be a generic name for legendary heroes which turns up in several close variants (Hung, Rung, Ruang). Some of the Cheung stories are versions of the Tai tales of heroic pioneering, and often the name Cheung is used for the legendary first ancestor of a *muang*. But the most elaborate version of the Cheung epic is reckoned to be based on a story of Lawa defiance against the Tai.

The first part of the tale is a romance. Cheung falls in love with the daughter of a *muang* ruler, but is rejected because he cannot pay the huge bride price demanded. But then when another suitor - probably Tai - begins to pursue the girl, Cheung is called on to help, becomes a great warrior, and gets the girl. The epic then moves into a second act in which Cheung leads the Lawa warriors in a more general defiance of the Tai. Cheung is splendidly successful until the Tai unfairly ask for help from the gods and terrestrial allies. Against such heavy odds, Cheung is killed on the field of battle. But all is not lost. He is immediately reborn as a spirit, and resumes the battle in heaven. He defeats many gods including Indra and the ruling spirits of several *muang*. This sublime defiance has echoed back to earth. Revolts by Lawa, Khmu, and other subordinate groups right down to the twentieth century have invoked Cheung as millenarian inspiration (Chamberlain 1986, 1992, 1998b; Smalley 1965; Proschan 1998).

Another tale of conflict is recorded by the Akha, a Tibeto-Burman people who preserve their history through oral tradition in great

detail (Alting 2000). From around the third century AD, the Akha lived in southern Yunnan on the Red and Black rivers where they grew rice in the lowlands and became subjects of the Nanchao kingdom. The Tai arrived in the area only around the thirteenth century. The Akha briefly founded a kingdom at Mojiang to resist both Tai and Chinese inroads. But Tai warriors besieged the capital, cut off water supplies, and forced them to flee. The Akha first retreated south-westwards and crossed the Mekong around Chiang Rung. But the Tai continued to press them, and the Akha broke into groups and scattered into the hills. The Akha are now found as mid-level swidden farmers in scattered areas across the hills. Their songs and oral texts record how they lost the irrigated lowlands to the Tai who came "upstream" from the south. They say that "the Tai invented war" (Alting 2000, 137).

Some of the Tai migrants may have been warriors. Condominas (1990, 45) assumed all of them were. Barlow (2001) describes how the groups in the Guanxi hills became steadily more militarised from around the fifth century BC onwards. The typical political unit was a single valley (*dong*). Even before the Han incursions, warrior chiefs had begun to displace earlier shaman-rulers and extended control over several valleys. In the face of the Han, they sometimes revolted and sometimes hired themselves out as mercenary armies. Their armies were based on a three-man unit which farmed together and also fought as a team: "One man carried the shield which covered the body and the other two threw spears from behind.... They came on like a southern fire" (Barlow 1987, 253, 257-8). The Nong group which rebelled in the eleventh century bred horses for cavalry, fought with swords and crossbows, built hill-top forts for defense, had female warriors, tattooed their bodies, and used chicken bones to divine their prospects for victory (Barlow 1987; Schafer 1967, 50, 56).



Contact II: Compromise

But not all stories of contact are stories of battle. The second form of encounter results in more subtle stories of compromise.

In the Suwanna Khamdaeng story from Lanna, the Tai pioneer who is led to the new city by a golden deer announces, “it is necessary to obey the people who were born and live at that place”. He raises the Lawa chief to a high official rank and marries two of his daughters. The ranking Lawa chief then teaches the Tai people how to live without theft, lying, adultery, drunkenness, or drugs. Both Lawa and Tai are happy. The rains are good. One year of cultivation yields seven harvests. People multiply and new settlements proliferate (Notton 1926, Yonok, 7-11).

Several tales specify how important it is for the Tai migrants to honour local customs and social practices. A little later in the Suwanna Khamdaeng story, three of the Tai ruling family die of fever. The Lawa tell them that if they have a fever, stomach ache, sore eyes or other problems, it means the local phi (spirits) are hungry and the problem can be overcome by feeding them. “Ever since this epoch,” the legend notes, “the Tai have taken up the example of the Lawa.” When drought and famine occur later, they decide to prevent the bad spirits distinguishing between peoples: the Tai adopt the Lawa hairstyle, and the Lawa put on Tai-style dress (Notton 1926, Yonok, 19-21). In another version, the Lawa and Tai swap dress and hair-styles to confuse an enemy (Aroonrut 2002, 5).

When the Tai chief comes upon the Lawa’s abandoned settlement in Kengtung, his soldiers are about to destroy an idol left behind. The chief stops them, and sends a mission to the Lawa. He has the Lawa chronicle translated into Tai so he can understand the local background. He takes instruction from the Lawa chronicler on how properly to propitiate the local spirits (Notton 1926, Mahathera Fa Bot, 44-5). As a result, he prospers. Other tales tell how the Tai who mistreat the Lawa’s cult images come to grief.

At the end of the Mahathera Fa Bot tale, the moral of cooperation is heavily emphasised. If the town is attacked, offerings have to be made to the Lawa gods, the Tai ancestors, various Indic deities, other local spirits including that of the Ping River, and the spirit of the Lawa chief. The town is then ritually surrounded by a rope of plaited grass, symbolising the “perfect unity” of the fibres plaited in an emerald cord (Notton 1926, Mahathera Fa Bot, 60-3).

In several of the Tai legends, the Lawa are portrayed as *yak* (monsters) who terrorise the local people until the Tai come. Then the *yak* are either subdued or chased away, but their role is not totally erased; often the *yak* are then incorporated into the spirit pantheon as protective deities. At Chiang Mai for example, the *yak* are transformed into Pu Sae and Na Sae, the ancestor spirits of the Lawa and protector spirits of the city (Tanabe 2000, 297). In other versions, the Lawa chief who compromises and coexists with the Tai is transformed into a protective ancestral spirit (Ratanaporn 1998). The Chiang Saen Lawa who retires back to Doi Tung is ultimately reborn as such a spirit.

Several town legends include a story in which the Lawa come down from the hills, enter the palace just before the Tai ruler’s coronation, start eating a meal, and have to be chased out so the ceremony can proceed. This bit of horse-play was re-enacted in the coronation ceremonies at Chiang Mai, and other Tai capitals down to recent times. Similarly, in the Chiang Mai story, Mangrai has to enter his capital following a Lawa carrying a basket and leading a dog (Aroonrut 2002). In Kengtung, the Khun ruler ascends the throne only after striking a bargain with the prior Lawa ruler. At Luang Prabang the Kasak, who claim to be descendants of the original Mon-Khmer rulers of the place, shoot arrows at the palace until the Tai king disperses them by throwing a rice ball (Tanabe 2000, 298). Chamberlain (1986, 63) summarises the meaning of these stories:

The subjugated race is placed in a position of quasi servitude, but because

they are the older population they hold the key to the control of the local spirits and they have a more powerful magic. Thus, they must receive a modicum of respect from the conquerors and will always take part in spirit ceremonies.

The readiness to adopt local knowledge and practice, and the ability to develop ritual dramas which stabilised relations of subjection, suggest that the Tai shared a cultural background with the people whom they dominated. They may also have carried some practical social technology. We have little knowledge of sociopolitical organisation among the Yue other than that land was controlled by the chieftain and granted to households in return for military service (Barlow, 2001, ch. 2.4). The earliest description of a Tai polity is found in the *Bai-yi zhuan*, the report of two envoys sent to Luchuan (M. Mao) in 1396 (Wade, 1996). This political structure is elaborate. The ruler (*zhao*) is assisted by a chief administrator (*zhao-meng*) and other officials who control units of people and are rewarded by corvée and taxes from a designated territory. “When assembled the people are troops, when dispersed they are civilians.” Levies of one in three or five are raised by official recruiting agents. Entry into official ranks is so prized that, “When a young man is given an official rank, his father and elder brother kneel and offer obeisance to him.” Nobles wear distinctive and luxurious clothes, are accorded great public respect, and travel around with a thousand attendants such that their “their elephants, horses and servants fill the road”. A courier service transmits messages over long distances. With this system, the Bai-yi rule over several different peoples, some of which are described as “extremely black”, and some of which live in the mountains.

Many later studies have described the capacity of Tai social systems to absorb other peoples by emulation. This appears to already be the case in fourteenth century Luchuan: “While the language and customs of the various yi differ, the Greater Bai-yi are the chiefs, and

thus the various yi sometimes imitate their behaviour” (Wade 1996, 7). Some of the legends suggest that Mangrai, the greatest Tai chief of all, is descended from the Chiang Saen lineage whose names suggest strongly they are Lawa. He may have “become Tai” through marriage to the daughter of the Tai Lu ruler of Chiang Rung.

Terwiel (1980, 1981, 1983) compared social habits and cultural practices across different groups of Southwestern Tai from the Red River to the Brahmaputra. Besides the Tai linguistic structure and affinity for rice-growing, the major common elements were a cosmology with a sky god who cleanses the world through drought and flood before populating it with people, animals and knowledge; a physiology based on the *khwan* (essence or life-force) of each body part; an affinity for various forms of divination using animals; the political structure of the *muang*; and the importance of village spirits, usually associated with a *jai ban* (central village pillar) or similar ritual objects, and animal sacrifice. But in other respects, Terwiel found, Tai local cultures are very varied. While the cosmologies share a sky god and human descent into the world, the details of the descent vary greatly, probably through the accretion of local legends, histories and hero stories. In many places, the mass of humanity is born out of a gourd which the gods place in the world. Elsewhere, creation uses other devices including eggs, vines, and seeds. Even the gourd legend varies to suit different sociologies. In some places, all humanity emerges from a single aperture. In others, the gods make a second hole with a burnt stick through which the Lawa emerge, becoming blackened in the process. In yet others, there are several gourds from which different people emerge. The hero figures who make the transition from divine to earthly existence - Borom/Bulom, Cheung, Lo - recur in legends and ancestries found in different places, but the relations between them differ between versions (siblings, successors, allies). Similarly, many rituals seem to have been borrowed or devel-



oped in the locality, particularly fertility rituals which require a strong relevance to the local ecology. Along the middle Mekong, major annual fertility festivals are focused around boat races and processions. Further south, rocket festivals are popular. Techniques of divination similarly vary greatly from place to place, variously using pig's livers, eggs, or chickens' feet, tongues or thighs.

Chinese

There are also stories of interchange with Chinese on the frontier. The heroic Tai prince Saengto defends Kengtung against Chinese attacks and terrifies the Chinese emperor by filling his cushions with wasps. As a result, the emperor gives him a daughter in marriage. Saengto lives in China but sends his sons back south to found new *muang* and new ruling lineages (Sao Saimong Mangrai 1981, 232-3). In the foundation legend of Mogaung, a daughter of the Chinese emperor floats down the Irawadi on a raft, meets a "white tiger" who had been her husband in a previous existence, and together they produce the four sons who rule over Mogaung and its outlying *muang* (Sao Hso Hom and Pu Loi Tun 1998, 244-5).

Tai were drafted into Chinese armies and taken north. Tai warriors conducted raiding expeditions into Yunnan and Sichuan (Wade 1997). Chinese frontier officials and soldiers took local wives, or "went native" and faded into the local population. According to a Chinese record from 1499, "many criminals on-the-run from Jiangxi, Yunnan and Dali" took refuge in the Shan regions (Daniels 2000, 87). All along this long frontier between Chinese expansion and Tai migration, genes were being exchanged.

Li Fang Kwei suggests that the distinctive 60-year calendar used by most Tai groups originates from China before the sixth century. Cheah Yanchong (1988, 1996) argues that the Tai adopted much Chinese political structure and vocabulary, including words such as *khun*, *jao*, and *chiang*; the idea of *kin muang* (eating the city or state, a literal translation from the

Chinese, *shi yi*), and possibly also the more formalised structure of the *muang*. He also draws attention to the similarity between Tai and Chinese concepts of land/ancestor spirits, and the probable Chinese origin of important words such as *thaen*, the most common Tai name for the sky god, and *khwan*, the body essence. Terwiel (1981, 151) also points out several borrowings from Chinese kinship practice, including the use of kin numeratives. Maspero (1981) notes possible Chinese origins for Tai marriage rituals, the use of city and village pillars, house spirits, and stories of descent into the world. He also draws attention to possible Tai origins for some Chinese words and cultural practices. Exchange went both ways.

The organisation of Tai armies in decimal units (*nai sip*, *nai roi*) may have been adapted from Chinese (and more especially Mongol) practice. Lu chronicles describe how the Mongols used this *ho sip* system in the suppression campaigns in southern Yunnan in the thirteenth century (Lemoine 1987, 131). The Mogaung chronicle describes how the four ruling brothers (produced by the liaison of a Chinese princess with a local "white tiger") travelled to the imperial court to learn statecraft and military strategy (Sao Hso Hom and Pu Loi Tun 1998, 245). Some believe that Chiang Mai's nearly-square city plan was modelled on the Chinese frontier garrison settlements. Vickery (1996, 180-2) suspects that the structure of state administration adopted in Thai states originated from these early Chinese contacts.

Conclusion

The early history of the Tai – whether in the Nanchao story, the "Yue school", or the counter narrative of "the Tai were always here" – is pursued as a search for "ancestors", implying a blood line stretching back into the past. The linguists' concept of a Proto-Tai language is easily assimilated into this historical model to imagine the development of a Tai linguistic, cultural and ethnic diaspora from a single point of origin.

But pushing ethnicities back into the past is rather like pushing nation-states back into the past. It imagines things which were not there. It obscures the changes which bring ethnicities and nation-states into being. Ethnonyms are always historico-political constructs.

Linguists identify the origins of the Tai language family in sub-Yangzi China. The Han Chinese described the varied inhabitants of this area with the generic term “Yue”. Recent textual and archaeological study has stressed that these societies were more complex than the “barbarian” tag implies. Over a long period from around 400 BC onwards, the Han progress into the sub-Yangzi region caused major changes in society, culture, and language. These changes evolved gradually because the armed invasions and population inflows were obstructed by disease and armed resistance. Eventually, however, there were two main results. Some Yue were absorbed into the mixed Han/local cultures which developed along the southern coast. Others retreated into the mountains and valleys of the hinterland. Both developments created new languages—the hybridised dialects (Wu, Gan, Yue, Min) of the sinified coastal politics on the one hand, and the Tai family on the other.

As linguists such as Diller and Dixon argue, the Tai language may have evolved from several earlier tongues rather than from a specific, identifiable sub-set of Yue. The Tai languages, and their language communities, were formed by the processes of migration, resettlement, and contact in this tumultuous period begun from the Han intrusions. The arc of hills stretching from Guangxi to Assam was already an established trade route and a zone of cultural diffusion. The spread process was not a singular, even flow, but successive waves with both splits and joins. Probably there were two major stages in this development. In the first, lowland refugees and more established hill-dwellers (Ailao?) developed new societies in the hills behind the coastal plain. In the second, peoples moved westwards, precipitated by successive Chinese frontier pacification campaigns.

Projecting the family-tree of Tai languages onto the map of the region suggests the overall pattern of this second phase. One major route seems to have gone up into Yunnan; then down the Mekong, Salween, and Irawadi river systems; and finally further west to the Chindwin and the Brahmaputra. Another route seems to have moved across the lower arc of the Annamite hills, then down into the valleys of the Mekong and Chaophraya. There may have been another northern arc running west along the Yangzi system, and then south through Yunnan to intersect with the others. Each of these trends was composed of many smaller short-term moves, with forks, dead-ends, and u-turns. There seem to have been certain periods of special activity - during the Han inroads from the third century BC; again in the seventh and eighth centuries AD during the border pacification campaigns; again in the eleventh century following the Nong rebellion; and finally in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries with the Nanchao-Tali wars and Mongol pressure.

This westwards movement brought these migrants into contact with many other peoples. This was not a pioneer flow into vacant territory. There were pre-existing settlements of Mon-Khmer speakers. Tibeto-Burmans were moving into the same region from the northwest and Viets from the south over the same era. There was constant contact and exchange with Chinese.

Earlier attempts to imagine this process have stressed the Tai success in defeating and subjugating the earlier populations. Condominas (1990, 73) argued that the Tai diffusion was “the work of small groups of warriors led by an aristocracy which succeeded in imposing itself on numerous and varied groups of people covering vast territories... These Tay chiefs imposed their own system of relations on those conquered, who henceforth became the productive base of servile manpower.”²⁵ Certainly conquest and domination seems to have been a major theme. These are the stories which find their way into legends, songs, and chronicles. But warrior domination should probably not be imagined as the sole or central theme.



Recent studies of the big movements of language diffusion in the world have tended to stress that association with agricultural innovation or social innovation are what enables a certain language to spread and become dominant. The Tai languages may have spread along the hill tier not in association with rice, which was already present, but with better water-management techniques to increase and stabilise yields.²⁶ The evidence is indirect but intriguing. Many Tai foundation legends stress that the migrants are searching for a particular kind of landscape - a flat plain between mountain and river ideal for growing rice with water from hill streams. This landscape echoes that of the mountain valleys in the area of language origin. It is echoed too in most of the Tai settlements across the spread zone.

In addition, the Tai may have had (or developed in the course of migration) some effective social techniques. There is now a large literature which explains the muang as a structure for managing a varied population in a graded hierarchy, and which stresses the ability of the Tai to absorb other peoples. But this literature is based on evidence from the last century. We cannot simply project the findings back into the past. Yet again there is some evidence that these techniques were present or evolving. Many of the foundation legends stress the Tai newcomers' readiness to adopt pre-existing local practices, and their skill in drawing other groups into subordinate relationships. The earliest account of political structure, in the *Bai-yi zhuan*, suggests a complex of military, administrative, legal and cultural techniques to manage a varied population. The *Bai-yi zhuan* also hints at the famous capacity of the Tai *muang* to absorb others by emulation.

Finally, much of what became the features of Tai languages, cultures, and societies developed in the process of diffusion itself. These societies were highly mobile. Migrations continued over later centuries, resulting in a complex mosaic of local sub-communities, constantly rearranged. In addition, Tai societies were synthetic, with a high capacity to absorb

both peoples and cultural practices, and to adapt themselves to new environments. Much cultural practice was adopted locally from earlier inhabitants, including local spirits, divination techniques and fertility festivals. Much systematic learning was adopted from the Chinese, especially software such as calendar systems, political terminology, and perhaps the structure of *muang* polities.

The Yue disappeared. New societies and cultures took shape out of the experience of migration, contact, and exchange. By the thirteenth century, the term "Tai" was being used as a descriptor for some of these, principally around the upper Mekong. Only much later, and mainly as a result of work by western historians and linguists, was the term given a wider meaning as a descriptor for a whole family of languages and peoples. Then the term became available for various political purposes.

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Notes

¹ With thanks to Acharn Chatthip and Acharn Cheah who helped me see the landscape. Thanks also to Geoff Wade, Michael Vickery, Grant Evans, Paul Sidwell and Thongchai Winichakul who helped with sources and criticism but who are in no way guilty of the result.

² There were several variants of the same plot, reviewed in Terwiel (1978, 1990).

³ I am greatly indebted to Cholthira (2001, 3-31) who reviewed this literature. See also Bai (2002).

⁴ Diller's rope image (28) is strikingly similar to Dixon's graphic portrayal of the same point (101). The *processes* underlying Diller's and Dixon's observations are different, but here I'm noting the similarity of the pattern.

⁵ This was the insight behind Jared Diamond's best-seller, *Guns, Germs and Steel*.

⁶ Wiens (1967) and Eberhard (1968) prepared the way for this school by calling the rice-growing communities in early sub-Yangzi China "Tai". In effect, they applied a modern ethnonym to these early communities on grounds that they exhibited certain cultural traits later associated with the Tai. In other words, Eberhard and Wiens identified and named the ancestors by reference to their supposed descendants, and then the Yue school repeated the process in



reverse, achieving a perfectly circular argument. Both groups assume that ethnicities are essential, and ignore when and how they are historically constructed.

⁷ The editor of the *Han Shu* said, speaking of the Yue region: “The southern regions are humid; as summer approaches it becomes terribly hot. If you live near water, then poisonous snakes will come. There are many plagues and pestilences; of ten troopers, two or three will die before blades are even bloodied” (Barlow 2001, ch. 3).

⁸ “The farther south one goes from the Yangtze, the more tones one hears in the Chinese dialects along the way”, also more trailing modifiers and more everyday words that are not Mandarin (Ramsey 1987, 36). See the maps in Norman (1988, 184) and Ramsey (1987, Figures 5 and 6). Below an oblique line running roughly from the Vietnam-Yunnan-Guangxi intersection to Shanghai, the dialects spoken (including Cantonese, Hakka and Teochiew) are structurally “Chinese”, but have absorbed elements from the older languages from the area. Ballard (1981, 176) concludes: “Cantonese (Yueh) shows the clear influence of Tai-like languages; some Min areas show similar influences. Min shows affinities with Yao, and Wu/Chu even more so with Miao. We can suggest, then, that the original populations in these areas before sinicization were related to these ethnic groups.” Bauer (1996) shows that some non-Chinese words in Cantonese probably came from the same origins as Tai.

⁹ “The *Ba, Shu, I, Liao, Qi, Li, Chu, Yue*, all twitter like birds and call like animals and their languages are not the same; they are as different from each other as are monkeys, snakes, fish, and tortoises.... The river valleys in which they live extend for thousands of miles, they can be governed with an intelligent loose rein, but their people cannot be controlled. They have irrigated fields and seldom farm dry fields, and engage in fishing.” (Barlow 2001, ch. 4, from *Wei Shu*).

¹⁰ Chamberlain’s work is controversial for many reasons. First, he actively seeks connections between linguistic events and other sorts of historical events. Purist linguists find this too

ambitious. Second, his work was used (by others) in the controversy over the origins of Sukhothai Inscription I. Third, Chamberlain is often abstruse and unclear. The point about Chamberlain’s work is that he is looking for patterns which have historical meaning, rather than conducting classification for classification’s sake. There are many different ways to classify dialects, resulting in very different groupings. See the original sketch by Li (1960), and the review by Hartmann (1980).

¹¹ The relatively high degree of mutual comprehension among speakers of different members of the Tai language family suggests that the dispersion was both recent and quick. But in the light of recent linguistic theory, it is unnecessary to stick to the timetable of 2,000 years.

¹² The map is based on CeDRASEMI (1985), Lebar et al. (1964) and the map in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica Languages of the World* entry on the Tai languages (1995, 714). It omits the large Tai-speaking areas to the south. For simplicity, Chiang and its variants (Jiang, Xhiang) has been abbreviated as C., and Muang and its variants as M.

¹³ See the routes and map reconstructed from a ninth century Chinese source in Luce (1961). One route travelled up the Red River and then across the plains to Tali. A second went almost directly westwards from Tali to the Brahmaputra. A third passed southwest from Tali to the Irawadi (around the site of Mandalay) and then turned northwest to join the second route on the Brahmaputra (around the later Ahom area).

¹⁴ Note I am not arguing here, as some do, that “Tai” were migrating into this area from the Tang era or earlier. Rather I am suggesting there was movement into this area over a long period, at the end of which there are peoples who seem to be relatively identifiable as the Shan.

¹⁵ I am abbreviating muang/maung/mong as “M.” to simplify the problem of transliteration.

¹⁶ Doré (1987) times it much earlier.

¹⁷ “It is a mean rustic place, of no use whatever. The people are all obstinate, stupid and ignorant. If we get the land, it can hardly be counted as an asset” (Luce 1959, 79).

¹⁸ The Silpa Watthanatham historians argue that the military pressure was not decisive, and that these groups were pulled southwards by trade routes extending upward from the coast. But their evidence is elusive.

¹⁹ There is one hint: Tatsuo Hoshino (2002) argues that Wen Dan and associated places found in the seventh century Tang annals were Tai settlements around the middle Mekong. But his evidence for the Tai in these places is based on detecting “a very Daic ring” in the Chinese rendering of place names and titles.

²⁰ This pattern is similar to the assumption of Srisak and Suchit (1991). But the timing is different.

²¹ These legends have survived through oral transmission and constant copying, and hence may have changed over time. As evidence of specific events or dates, they are a difficult source. Here, however, I am using the story content.

²² Renfrew and others stress that agricultural innovations tend to spread east-west (rather than north-south) because temperature, day-length, and other climatic factors remain similar. Bellwood suggests rice may gradually have

moved southward from the Yangzi because prevailing temperatures were cooling. The passage across the hills is of course roughly westward.

²³ Pulleyblank (1983, 430) thinks that before the Ming era, the Chinese referred to the Zhuang as “Tung” which meant a mountain valley or “level ground between cliffs and beside a stream”.

²⁴ Luce (1965) speculates that, some centuries earlier, the Mon-Khmer went through a process of dispersion very similar to that of the Tai, and following a similar path from the coast of southwestern China, along the Red River to Yunnan, south down the Irawadi, and finally over the hills to Assam and India, where isolated Mon-Khmer speakers (Munda) are still found on the hills behind the northeastern coast.

²⁵ See, however, Vickery’s review in the *Thai Yunnan Project Newsletter*, 13 June 1991.

²⁶ See also O’Connor (1995) which uses a similar argument to rationalize the domination of Tai and other ethnicities from the north of mainland Southeast Asia.