RETROGRADE RECONSTRUCTION
IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Chess problem solvers have long employed 'retrograde analysis' in working on difficult problems: a checkmate position (= the solution) is set up at the very start, with subsequent exploration of possible avenues for reaching it. Something of the same sort: 'retrograde reconstruction' is useful in working with the Austro-Tai languages of Southeast Asia, attempting to piece together the di- and trisyllabic roots of that stock that have undergone decomposition in both Kadai (typically CRL) and Miao-Yao (typically CRR). The three AT roots cited by way of illustration include one trisyllabic, with *-ŋi- as the (AN) 'connecting link', (TOOTH), and two disyllabic ʔ (affixed) trisyllabic, (WEEP) and (I). In all three roots the AN forms provide 'solutions,' so to speak, and one ends up attempting to fit together assorted congeries of odd-looking cognates: P-Tai *kuə, Lk. tsiə and Laha oə 'I', showing excellent tonal agreement!

The primary SEA developments to keep in mind are:

1. Syllabic reduction throughout the area
   AN: primarily /3/>/2/: the 'drive' (Brandstetter) or 'drift' (Blust) towards disyllabism
   KD: both /3/ and /2/>/1/ (Chinese infl.) via canonical reduction on-the-left (CRL), with initial consonant clusters making for an important exception (CRR)
   MY: as above, but on-the-right (CRR) for /2/>/1/ reduction
2. Split cognate formation
   Within AN~KD~MY as well as interfamilial

3. Vocalic transfer (VT)
   AN: rare: in Chamic under mainland areal influence (Lee 1974)
   KD: widespread/typical (Benedict 1979), often following reduction of V₁ to /a/, yielding /i/ in SYL-II
   MY: uncommon; evidenced in some roots

4. Incorporation of morphological elements
   PAT prefixed *qa- (distressed>ka-): nominal, proto-role undet.; widespread, especially in KD; probably-SEA 'animal prefix'
   PAT suffixed *-a(n); nominal, proto-role undet.; uncommon
   PAT pronominal marker *ʔi-; see I, below
   PAT 'stative' prefixed *ma-: P-Tai *maw^A 'drunk'*ma-bušuk
   PAT personal/pronominal marker *tsi-; see I, below
   PAT nominal/pronominal marker *ʔu-; see I and TOOTH, below
   PAT infixed *-um- 'actor focus-marker' (AN role); (see Benedict 1991 for *ʔa(-um-)aRi 'come/return' [motion towards speaker])
   PAT suffixed *-en 'object focus-marker' and *-an 'referent focus-marker' (AN roles); (see Benedict 1989)
   PAT infixed *-γ-, *-r-, *-l- and *-l-; roles unclear/undet.; see TOOTH, below

5. Nasal increments (NI)
   An absolute benchmark of AT, represented everywhere; well retained in MY whereas KD has *mp>/b/, *mb>/m/, etc.
6. Secondary aspiration and glottalization
   Aspirated or glottalized (including imploded) consonants always secondary, e.g., frequently ʔ+cons.<prefixed *qa- (above)

7. Consonant clusters (see WEEP, below) vs. dyads (see Benedict 1989)

8. Development of tonal systems (Chinese influence)
   PAT apparently had pitch-accent (retained in Japanese), replaced by tones (<basic 3 tones) in both KD and MY; tones late in AN: Oceanic; Chamic (Huihui/Sanya on Hainan) under areal influence

9. Procrustean cons. loss in KD (see Note 4)

TOOTH

PAT *tsaŋi(m)pan

PAN (gen.) *(ŋ)iŋən (typical SYL-III
   *a>/ə/)

/3>/2/ split

N. Phil. *saŋi<PAN-level *tsaŋi

with infixed *l

*liŋən~*niŋən doublet (Blust)

with infixed *γ

P-Atayalic *gipun (P. Li)
   <*ŋiŋən Note 1

/3>/1/

P-Miao *hmye<PMY *hmye[m]<*h-
   myim (reg. shift) <*ŋim (PMY
   lacks *ŋ-) <*ts[a]ŋim[pan]
/3/>/1/ [cont.]

with VT

Be ton¹ (Sav./Haud.) ~tin¹ (Hash.), from earlier *tian<*pian (reg. shift)

plus velar+
labial→
labialization

PKS *pywanᴬ (Thurgood)

with further→
dentolabial but
without VT

P-Tai *vanᴬ (reg. medial voicing)

Lakkia wanᴬ<*vanᴬ (Lakkia lacks *v-)

same, with VT

P-Hlai *fyanᴬ: Matisoff reconstructs
*fənᴬ but notes Jiamao tshan¹<*tshan¹;
add Xifang and Cunhua sen¹, also
Mefuli xien (Stübel 1937)

with infixed *1

Gelao *p(-1-)anᴬ: Wanzi (Gao) pan¹,
Pudi (Ao) ma-fuŋ½, Liuzhi (Duoluo)
plan½^Note 2

/1/+3/>/2/
(and /2/)

/>/1/ with

prefixed *(ʔu-)
along with VT

PKD-level Recon:

*(ʔu-) tsanʃip(-1-)an or set up split
doublet?