REMARKS ON THE ORIGINS OF
THAO HUNG OR CHEUANG

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The paper that I originally presented at the conference in honor of Professor Gedney was unfortunately a version of another paper given some months earlier in Denmark concerning the epic poem entitled Thao Hung or Cheuang. That paper is slated to be published elsewhere, so for the present volume I would like to expand on my general topic of this poem and discuss first the question of geographical location (an issue of some controversy in Thailand today), then give some linguistic and historical characteristics of that location, and finally address some remarks to the gaps in our knowledge of the region generally and implications for further study. I hope that Professor Gedney will find these of interest.

At a panel discussion held during the Seminar on Isan Literature in 1979 at the Teacher Training College of Sakon Nakhon, several views were expressed on the origins of the poem. These ideas were summarized in a report of the seminar in the Thai journal Lok Nang Sue (“Discussion” 2523). In the same issue an analytical article appeared entitled “Thao Hung or Cheuang: Literary Masterpiece of Isan,” by Khun Prathip Chumphol. I am very happy to see this interest blossoming in Thailand and I would like to suggest some additional information that may prove relevant concerning the origin of the poem.

1. The manuscript which Mahasila Viravong transcribed and published in 1943 was at that time in the National Library in Bangkok. It was a latania-leaf manuscript of some two hundred leaves written in the Lao alphabet. The original (which has since disappeared) was taken by the Thai army from Xieng Khwang in 1883 during the Ho wars (Mahasila 1953). This was the general period and region of the Kha uprisings, which were also known as the Soek Cheuang, or Cheuang wars, which I shall discuss below. At the end of the manuscript is a statement: “Chane Keo Ban Vang Ban is the one who wrote this manuscript for the honorable Opharat.” Ban Vang Ban is
most probably what is nowadays referred to as Ban Ban in the north of Xieng Khwvng province near the Hua Phan (Sam Neua) border. Since this is the original location of the document (and certainly this is by far the oldest and most complete version available to us), I believe we should begin our inquiry into its origins in this general area.

2. Before looking at possible geographical, linguistic, and historical clues in the area, the other versions should at least be mentioned.

a. The prose manuscripts of Luang Prabang. Finot (1917) lists three manuscripts entitled Nitan Praya Cú'ong Lun, one in Luang Prabang of fourteen fascicles, and two (numbers 76 and 147) in the École Française d’Extrême-Orient Library of eleven fascicles each. Another manuscript, entitled Dutiyavamsamālinī (LP number 267), is considered by Finot to be a part of this as well, consisting of ten fascicles, the second of which is missing. The author of this version was said to be Buddhaghosa. The fate of these works is unknown to me, but Tamnan Phraya Cheuang, recently published by Chiang Mai University, is in fact a copy of this latter work, transcribed by a monk from Phrae during his stay in Luang Prabang in B.E. 2437–38. It is written in a curious mixture of Lao and Pali (Anand et al. 2524).

Since Finot’s brief summary may not be available to everyone, I will quote it here.


A cette époque le mu’oṅ Kua Rājadhānī ou Sākya avait un roi déjà vieux, connu sous le nom de Praya Kua. Il avait une fille, Ok kēo, et un neveu, Ėṅ Ka, qui avait épousé la fille du roi de Lābu (Lao). Praya Kua, apprenant que le Praya Luṅ Xuṅ, roi de Mu’oṅ Nu’on Yaṅ Lanna (Xieng Mai) avait deux filles d’une grand
Thao Hung or Cheuang

beauté, se mit en tête de les épouser: après avoir essayé trois fois refus, il eut recours à la force et envahit le Lanna en 503 (1141 A.D.). Le roi de ce pays demanda le secours de son neveu, l'uparat Cu'oōn Lun, en lui offrant son royaume et ses deux filles pour prix de la victoire. Le prince se rendit à cet appel: il tua le Praya Kua et mit son armée en fuite. Fidèle à sa promesse, le Praya Luūn Xu'n le sacra roi et lui donna ses filles en mariage.

Après trois ans de règne, Cu'oōn porta à son tour la guerre dans le Mu'oōn Kua Pakan, alors gouverné par la veuve du vaincu. Celle-ci fit une défense héroïque; mais assiégée dans sa capitale, elle dut capituler et donner sa fille Ok kēo en mariage au vainqueur, qui se fit sacrer roi et reçut l'hommage du Praya Videharat (Yunnan). Après avoir établi un vice-roi pour gouverner le pays, il retourna à Xieng Mai et épousa sa fiancée, la fille de Nañ Mēn, qui fut sa quatrième femme.

Aux royaumes conquis par lui ajouta le Mu'oōn Kha Xai à la mort de son frère aîné. Son autorité s'étendit sur 84.000 mu'oōn. L'aîne de ses fils eut pour aparanget M. Nay, M. Xieṅ Ku'a et M. Hoṅsavati (Pégou); le second M. Pakan, le troisième le Lan Xang (Luang Prabang), et le dernier Xieng Hung.

Il mourut à M. Pakan, âgé de 80 ans. Ses fils allèrent chercher ses os et les placèrent dans un that, à Xieng Mai.

b. A poetic version called Thao Nhi Ba Cheuang was discovered in a temple in Loei province and transcribed and published by Khun Danuphol Chayasind and Thongsuk Charumethichon (2523) at the Loei Teacher Training College. Although I have not read this version yet, it is said by the editors to be a shortened form of the Mahasila version.

c. A manuscript in the National Library, entitled Thao Ba Cheuang, is in bad condition (although it does not seem to be very old) and needs to be examined.

d. Apart from these complete manuscripts, all of which are long and detailed, there are many references to Cheuang in various
chronicles and legends, including the Ahom creation myth, the Northern Thai Chronicles, the legends of Khun Burom, the Xieng Khwang (Muang Phuan) Chronicles, the Black Tai Chronicles, the Khmu legends, the legends of other Austroasiatic groups, and probably in many other places still unknown to us.

As for Thao Hung, his name appears in the Luang Prabang Annals as the twenty-seventh king of Lan Xang:

Upon the death of Khun Kham, Khun Hung replaced him on the throne in C.S. 445. He took his army and made war against the Lao Kwak at Ngoen Yang or Xieng Sen for three years and was victorious. He had two children, one was named Prince Then Mo. (Chao Khammanh 2516)

Apparent cognates for Hung (/hun/ B4/), for example, Rung, Ruang, and Lung, occur in the myths and legends of the Ahoms, Shans, Sukhothai, and elsewhere.

The Khmu speakers of Northern Laos have legends about three characters who are kept separate (Smalley 1961): Cheuang, the messiahlike savior who will return to help the Kha peoples; Ai Nhi Kran, the Thao Nhi name that occurs throughout the poem in addition to Hung and Cheuang; and Ai Cet Hay (in the poem Cheuang is killed by Maen Ta Thok Cet Hay /mæn tæ thɔk cet hay/).¹

From the Stieng, an Austroasiatic group located in southern Vietnam, the following version was recorded (Gerber and Malleret 1946).

The Origin of the Stieng

At one time, all of the Moi were comprised of a single tribe who lived along the coast on the sea of China.

In this time, God descended from heaven and married a girl named Dai Chro Phek. From this union was born a son named Djieng, whom God took with him to heaven, abandoning the wife but giving her his permission to remarry.