CHAPTER 12

THE EFFICACY OF THE P/PH DISTINCTION FOR TAI LANGUAGES

James R. Chamberlain

Introduction

It was my intention from the beginning to remain clear of the controversy surrounding Sukhothai Inscription One since I felt that there was little I could contribute to what had already been said. Those who have become involved, however, have brought me unwillingly into the arena, and I stand accused of leading Michael Vickery astray, as well as others, and of supporting the notion that Inscription One is a fake. Of course, anyone who had bothered to read what I have written would have seen that those early linguistic studies of mine did not involve epigraphical insights, but were concerned with classification and comparative Tai phonology. Moreover, I have always used Inscription One in support of my ideas concerning the origins of the Sukhothai Thais and the historical locations of the Tais generally. In 1972, I used a passage from Inscription One to endorse the hypothesis that the language of Sukhothai was most closely related to that of Luang Prabang.

Now I find myself in a strange predicament. Those who maintain Inscription One is a fake have used my work to support their theory, and this, coupled with a good deal of runaway academic gossip, has evolved into a mistaken belief that I advocated the idea of fakery. Based on this gossip, rather than what I have written, William Gedney saw fit to make me the scapegoat in his Machiavellian pasquinade which accused me of influencing Vickery and others.¹ I am sure this was conceived as a cut-off-the-supplies-at-the-source kind of tactic, but from my perspective it is more akin to kicking-the-dog-instead-of-the-wife,
known in psychological parlance as displacement, a defensive rather than an offensive maneuver.

Furthermore, in a recent paper (1989) responding to Gedney's, Vickery has very elegantly defended my ideas, focusing particularly on Gedney's questionable *figurae causae*. This places me in the awkward position of having been assailed by the defenders of the faith, in the person of my own professor with whom I happen to agree on the matter of Inscription One's legitimacy, only to be vindicated by those with whom I disagree on this particular issue. As a result, I am left with no choice but to write this paper in the form of a rejoinder and append my voice to the dialogue which has taken place thus far.

The essence of the satisfaction with my views by Vickery and the dissatisfaction by Gedney, lies in the dating of the devoicing sound shift which changed the voiced initial stops reconstructed for Proto-Tai */b, d, j, g/ to either /p, t, c, k/ in some dialects, or /ph, th, ch or s, kh/ in others. In two articles, published in 1972 and 1975, I labeled these two groups the P dialects and the PH dialects respectively. The labels were just for convenience, like the P languages and Q languages of Celtic, but the controversy now being raised concerns whether the distinction reflects genetic relationships or is typological. This in turn has bearing on the issue of approximate dating and I would therefore like to address this question here and to clarify my current views. A second issue, not addressed except by innuendo in Gedney's paper, is the relationship of Ayutthaya to Sukhothai which I will take up in the second and third parts of this paper along with a discussion of the linguistic and historical position of Lao.

To my way of thinking, there has been a persistent and ever-widening gap between what is supposed to have happened historically, and what has been reconstructed linguistically. Thus, in my studies I have endeavored to avoid the errors of a too narrowly defined disciplinism. As will be seen in this paper, "maverick" though it may be, my approach takes inspiration from Professor Gedney at almost every step, and that is as it should be. A teacher is inspired by the truths he has uncovered
and passes on not just a bundle of reliquary facts, but the inspiration itself, epiphanies which kindle the flame of learning in the student. This is the process of knowledge, and when it is received it cannot be accepted uncritically. I have received much knowledge and inspiration from Professor Gedney, but I intend for these to remain alive, not kept mounted like hunting trophies on the wall.

1. PH and B

As I look back upon those articles, I naturally see some things I would like to change; for example, I do not now believe that there was a Houa Phanh branch of Lao; the Thai Bo, in one instance at least, turned out to be a group of bilingual Austroasiatic So who had adopted a Lao dialect. There probably never was a Neua-Phuan intrusion into an older population as I once suggested. I have yet to meet a Pong or a Phong, of either the Tai or the Kha variety, although I suspect that the term may be preserved in that Phou Thay subgroup called /kapOng / who were perhaps Austroasiatic (AA) speakers originally living in symbiotic relationships with Taïs. (Likewise, the ethnonyms of /kataak/ (Phou Thay); /kalēep/(Neua, Nho); /kalOm/ (Lue); etc. may fall into this category.)² My early dating of the sound shift, however, was based upon a variety of factors and influences which I still would hold to be valid. Following Gedney’s (1965) proposal of a Proto-Tai (PT) homeland along the eastern Vietnam - Kwangsi border; and taking into account the current locations of the Tai dialects and Tai populations in northern Vietnam; and in keeping with Haudricourt’s (1954) suggestion that Vietnamese had already undergone the sound change by the 12th century; the idea of an 8th or 9th century date was hardly a startling proposal. It should also be mentioned here that in 1962 (>1965) Brown had proposed a date of 1000 AD for this sound change. Gedney reviewed this work in 1965 and attacked not the date, but rather Brown’s acceptance of the conventional Yunnan homeland for what would have to be labeled Proto-Southwestern Tai, although Brown did not use that term. The Vietnamese assumed power in the 10th century
and the various Tai groups, surrounded by hostile Chinese and Sinicized Vietnamese invaders, had been in a constant state of upheaval and revolt since the early 7th century. These culminated in the revolt of Nung Tri Cao in the 11th century and were undoubtedly the reason for the Tai exodus to the west.\textsuperscript{3}

Also, there are clear linguistic patterns in the geographical distribution of the South-Central Tais and the development of the PT initial stops. There is a contiguous band from Cao Bang through So'n La and Lai Chau in Vietnam, through Phongsaly and Louang Nam Tha provinces in Laos, through Lanna in northern Thailand, through southern Yunnan in China, through the Shan States in Burma, to Assam, where all of the Tai languages have developed unaspirated stops in the voiced series. There is another contiguous area of Houa Phanh, Xieng Khuang, Luang Prabang, Xagnaboury, Vientiane, Northeast Thailand, and Central Thailand where the voiced series developed aspirated stops. I have chosen to view this generalization as a non-accidental pattern, not as a coincidence, hypothesizing that the sound change occurred before the various Tais began their migration west. Such a hypothesis is firmly within the confines of acceptable comparative and historical practice, and neither Gedney's animadversions upon my ideas, nor his sanctimonious invocation of the laws of historical phonology can alter this fact.

There is also a third possibility that I did not pursue in 1972 nor in 1975, that one group changed earlier than the other; that is, perhaps those dialects I have labeled the P group changed before the PH group. Since populations were mobile at the same time devoicing would have been occurring, this would allow for the late arrival of the change to Ayutthaya (assuming that is what happened), and it would account for those dialects of Khmu in northern Laos which borrowed words like /b00 - B4/ 'father' from Lao, and other Khmu dialects like Kwen which have borrowed the same item as /p00/ from Lue. (Note that Gedney cites only the former.)

As regards the language of Sukhothai, I suggested that it was most closely related to Luang Prabang and to Southern Thai. According to my reasoning, it could have been either a PH