

The Black Tai Chronicle of Muang Mouay

Part I: Mythology¹

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Introduction

The Kwaam To Muang (/Kwaam Too muang)² of the Black Tai, also known as the Tai Dam, is a genre of text which contains the history of the Tai people of a particular Chou /chuu²/ or Muang. These local administrative units were originally considered to be twelve in number, hence the name *Sip Song Chou Tai* applied to the region of northwestern Vietnam. There are, however, differences of opinion as to the names of the original twelve, and most Tais say that the number was increased to sixteen after the arrival of the French.³ The Chous or Muangs were not limited to the

¹ This is a revision of a paper first prepared and submitted to *Mon-Khmer Studies* in 1984 and presented to the Siam Society in 1985, subsequently summarized in the *Siam Society Newsletter* 1986, II.1:5-6. The text was translated into Thai and published in រាយណភាព ប្រវត្តិភាសា, 1985.8:71-109.

² In an effort to regularize the marking of tones, throughout this paper phonemes represented by upper case initial consonants are derived from the entire Proto-Tai voiceless series plus the Proto-Tai voiced series stops, while lower case consonants are used for all others. An absence of tone marker denotes PT *A tone; 1 = PT *B tone; 2 = PT *C tone.

³ According to the excellent work of Lao scholar Panh Phomsombath on the Black Tai system (1975), the original twelve Chou were:

1. Chou Lo /lɔ:/ (Nghĩa Lộ) (Văn Chân)
2. Chou Mouay /Muay²/ (Thuận Châu)
3. Chou Lai /lay/ (Lai Châu)
4. Chou Theng /Theny/ (Điện Biên Phu)
5. Chou La /laa/ (1) (Sơn La)
6. Chou La /laa/ (2) (?)
7. Chou Sang /Saay/ (Mộc Châu)
8. Chou So /Sɔ:/ (Phong Thổ)
9. Chou Toek /tɛk/ (Văn Yên) (Phú Yên)
10. Chou Vat /Vaat/ (Yên Châu)
11. Chou Chian /cian/ (Quỳnh Nhai)
12. Chou Thane /Thaan/ (Than Uyên)

[...]

Black Tai but included White Tai /Tay dən¹/, Red Tai /Tay dəŋ/, and others as well. For example, the city of Sam Neua in Houa Phanh province of Laos was alternatively called *Chou Sam*.

Kwaam To Muang texts begin with the creation and continue through a mythological period, a proto-historical period, and a historical period which includes the present. Such texts form only one portion of a larger funeral text known collectively as /Pap Soo Soŋ¹ Saan Terŋ/ 'sacred book for sending the words', which is recited only during funeral rites, and thus the purpose of the Kwaam To Muang is to show souls the way back to heaven, from which they originated. To this end, in theory at least, each Black Tai man maintains his own personal copy in which he records all of the places he travels during his lifetime so that his soul can retrace his travels on its journey back to heaven. The second part of the larger text, called /Kwaam Saan Soŋ¹/ contains the as yet unstudied rites for funeral sacrifices and repeats the first part of the creation myth. To my knowledge this textual tradition exists only among the Black Tai and perhaps among the White Tai where the two groups reside in adjacent areas. It has not been recorded as occurring elsewhere among the many other Tai groups living in northern Vietnam.

The text presented here is a translation of the mythological section of the Kwaam To Muang from Muang Mouay, a Black Tai center which at the end of the 18th century, according to Maspero (1950), was the "seigneurie fondamentale" or /mīaŋ kok/ from which emanated all of the hereditary nobility or Tao /Taaw²/ of the Black Tai. The text is the personal copy of Baccam Bing, an elder of the Lo-Kam /lōo Kam/ lineage who was kind enough to read it onto a tape at his home in Nong Boua Thong, Vientiane in 1973. The text was also photocopied at that time. His version was the result of a collective effort by several Black Tai elders from Muang Mouay, who, as refugees after the fall of Điện Biên Phu in 1954, sat together and reconstructed the text from memory since no one had escaped with a complete copy. So far as I can determine the reconstruction is complete, its obscurities being those shared with the Muang Theng version of Roux (1934), Maspero's brief rendition from Muang Lo

After the arrival of the French four Chou were added:

13. Chou Khoa /Khwa/ (Bình Du)
14. Chou Kwai /Kwaay/ (Tuần Giáo)
15. Chou Chanh /can/ (?)
16. Chou Nam Ma /nam maa²/ (?)

However, a list of 16 Chou provided by a Tai from Muang Vat shows the following:

1. Muang Mouay, 2. Muang La, 3. Muang Moua (Mai Son), 4. Muang Vat, 5. Muang Khoa, 6. Muang Sang, 7. Muang Toek, 8. Muang Lo, 9. Muang Lai, 10. Muang So, 11. Muang Theng, 12. Muang Sop Phop, 13. Muang Chanh, 14. Muang Bang, 15. Muang Khoai (Tuần Giáo), 16. Muang Ang.

(1950), and the multiple text compilation in Vietnamese by Đặng Nghiêm Van *et.al.* (1977), available to me only in a draft French translation.⁴

The portion translated in the present study covers what I have designated the mythological section, which includes the creation and the exploits of Pou Laan Cheuang, the last of the “ancestors” proper, that is, those whose names are preceded by the title /puu¹/ ‘grandfather’. The following section, which might be labeled the proto-historical section, begins with the story of Chau Ngou Hau/chaw² ɳjuu Haw¹, the Cobra Prince, a contemporary of the Lao king Souvanna Khamphong, grandfather of Fa Ngoum, first king of Lane Xang. In this section the titles may be Khun, Chau, Tao (‘prince, lord’) or even Pou Chau (‘king’), but never Pou alone.

The Legacy of Lo

According to Chinese history (*cf.* Schafer 1967), in 1122 B.C. Zhou replaced Shang as rulers of the Yellow River basin in the north of China and remained in power for nearly one thousand years until 221 B.C. During this time three other states emerged to the south in the basin of the Yangtze: Shu in Szechuan along the upper portion of the river; Chu along the middle Yangtze and Tong T'ing Lake region; and Yüeh in the vicinity of the delta. In 333 B.C., Chu conquered Yüeh and shortly thereafter, in 315 B.C., Zhou overran Shu. These two events triggered an exodus to the south by ruling classes of Shu and Yüeh into the area subsequently known as the land of the hundred Yüeh. In 207 B.C., a Qin official named Chao To with greater sympathies for the southern peoples founded the independent kingdom of Nan-Yüeh with its capital at Canton. This was eventually returned to Chinese control a hundred years later by Han Wu-ti.

To the south, in the delta of the Red River, the Dongsonian bronze age culture flourished from the 7th century B.C. until the first century A.D., known in Vietnamese history as the kingdom of Vǎn-lang. This kingdom is said to have been governed by kings named Hùng and feudal lords named Lăc (Lo), lineages whose antecedents will be discussed below. We read in Taylor (1983) that in the late 3rd century B.C. the Hùng line was brought to an end by King An Dương who ruled a kingdom called Nam Cương in the vicinity of Cao Bang, which seems to have been inhabited by Ou (Ngâu) refugees from the Qin onslaught against the Yüeh in Chu which began in 222 B.C. and in fact formed the southern border of Qin occupied Kwangsi. An Dương's real name was Phán of the Thuc ruling family. Through an alliance with the Lăc (Lo) he established the kingdom of Au-Lăc (Ngâu-Lo) and erected the famous citadel at

⁴ In their presentation the Vietnamese translations aspire to the rank of critical edition by combining some thirty texts. This is an admirable effort and the variants, so far as we know, are cited as they occur. The main weakness is that everything is translated into Vietnamese with absolutely none of the original Tai language included. This renders the text useless for linguistic, etymological, philological, and literary purposes, and eliminates any potential value as a primary historical source.

Several others have also contributed to the study of Black Tai creation myths, including Hartmann (1981), a version that contains many interesting recent additions, Lafont (1955), and Condominas (1980). Sumit Pitiphat of Thammasat University *et.al.* (1978) has provided the best description so far of the ceremonial context of the Black Tai funeral rites for the Lao Song in Thailand, especially the function of the /Khry kok/.

Cô-loa in Tây-vu. At a date after 180 B.C., Âu-Lắc was defeated by Nan-Yüeh under the emperor Chau To and was incorporated into that kingdom. Âu-Lắc was divided into two prefectures, Giao-chi in the territory surrounding the mouth of the Red River and Cruk-chân in the plain of the Ma River to the south. Even though Nan-Yüeh fell to Han in 111 B.C., the area remained under the overlordship of the Lắc ruling class until the coming of Ma Yuan in 40 A.D.

At this point the term Lắc or Lo vanishes from the historical record. However, we shall attempt to show that it did not disappear entirely, but was preserved as a lineage by their descendants, the Tais of the Sip Song Chou Tai in northwestern Vietnam and perhaps elsewhere. A brief look at the ethnolinguistic distribution of Tai groups proves useful. Tai languages have been divided into three branches: Southwestern, which ranges over Lai Châu, Sơn La, Thanh Hoá, and Nghê An (Nghệ Tĩnh) in Vietnam, all of Laos and Thailand, southern Yünnan, northern Burma, and Assam; Central, which is confined to the eastern Kwangsi-Vietnam border area, including Hà Tuyêñ, Cao Bằng, Lạng Sơn, Bắc Thái, Hà Bắc, Hoàng Liên Sơn, and parts of Quảng Ninh and Vinh Phú, as well as the southern portion of Kwangsi; Northern, which includes the northern portion of Kwangsi, the eastern half of Guizhou, a substantial population in the vicinity of Lào Cai and adjacent parts of Yünnan, and then a surprising distribution, separate from the rest, in Thanh Hoá and Nghê An in Vietnam, and Kham Keut District in Laos. Some scholars prefer to link the first two into a common group, called Southern (Gedney 1989) or South Central (Chamberlain 1975) on the basis of phonological similarity. It is significant that the general north-south axis of Northern Tai distribution is interrupted by the intrusion of Central Tai dialects to the north of the Red River delta, and Viet-Muong (Mon-Khmer) in the delta itself and adjacent areas to the south. Furthermore, it has been suggested that the Saek language found in Kham Keut may best be interpreted as a language which broke away prior to the unity of Proto-Tai (Gedney 1989). The next most closely related language family is Kam-Sui, located in the tri-border area of Kwangsi, Guizhou, and Hunan. And the most distantly related languages belong to the as yet ill-defined Kadai group which includes Hli on Hainan, Laha in Sơn La, Gelao in western Guizhou and many dialects of Lachi and Laqua along the northern frontier of Vietnam and adjacent China.

As regards dating and likely points of origin, Gedney (1989) has estimated that the Tai languages display approximately the same degree of differentiation as Romance languages in Europe, where good written evidence exists of the Latin mother language originating about 2,000 years ago. Gedney (1965) has also ventured to place the homeland of Proto-Tai in the Central Tai speaking area of the eastern Kwangsi-Vietnam border where the greatest linguistic diversity occurs. My own studies on zoogeographical distribution and comparative zoological taxonomies (1977ff.) place the Proto-Tai-Kam-Sui point of origin around the lower Yangtze in about 750-500 B.C. This remains somewhat tentative due to the paucity of zootaxonomic data from Kam-Sui, but the general patterns are clear: animals with the greatest north to south distribution have taxa reconstructable in Proto-Tai, whereas animals found only south of the Tropic of Cancer do not. With this general linguistic picture in mind some of the historical data will perhaps make more sense, particularly Rousseau's (1923:245ff) hypothesis concerning Yüeh migrations. Vietnamese has been classified by Diffloth (1991) as belonging to the Vietic branch of Mon-Khmer, which had as its point of origin inland in Kham Keut District in what is now Borikhamxay Province in Laos (formerly assigned to Khammouan Province). After an initial split of the Thaveung sub-group, the secondary locus was probably Nghê Tinh (Nghệ An). The area of greatest diversity of Vietnamese proper is even further