The origin of the Sek implications for Tai and Vietnamese history

James R. CHAMBERLAIN
Chulalongkorn University

Dedication:

In a 1958 communication to the Journal Asiatique, having pointed out that the Sek spoken in Khammouane Province was not related to the Sác of Cadière and not related closely to Lao, but rather resembled the Tai languages spoken in Guangxi and Guangdong such as Man-Cao-Lan, Ts’un Lao, Nung-an, or Dioi, André Haudricourt remarked:

The Sek are experts in irrigated agriculture; they could not have come from China across the mountains since there are no traces elsewhere in Laos; rather they are found near the ancient Cham frontier of the Chinese empire before the independence of Vietnam. One might ask whether it is a question of an old Chinese deportation to the frontiers of people from Guangdong carried out more than a millennium ago; and it would be worthwhile to see if in the annals the historians have spoken of them.

Unfortunately, since this issue was raised 40 years ago, no one has attempted a response. No doubt this is due to the mixing of disciplines necessary to approach the relevant information. I would therefore like to dedicate this paper to the memory and departed spirit of André-G. Haudricourt, a great multidisciplinarian, whom it was my honor to have known.

1. Introduction

First noted by Haudricourt in the 1950s, the importance of Sek\textsuperscript{1} to comparative and historical Tai studies became known to the Tai studies community primarily through the efforts of Professor William J. Gedney in a series of papers and publications dating from 1965 through 1982, culminating in the publication of his extensive glossary and texts, a large volume of 989 pages edited by Thomas Hudak in 1993. This impressive volume is the result of intensive field studies carried out by Gedney in the northeastern Thai province of Nakhon Phanom, a location to which

\textsuperscript{1}I have retained the original spelling of Sek, (1) because it is consistent with the romanization used in Laos, and (2) because phonetically the vowel is really /e/ rather than /æ/ which is true for the Lao language as well.

TAI STUDIES PROCEEDINGS 97-127
many Sek speakers had been transported by the Thai military approximately between the years of 1828 and 1860. A few of the texts incorporated into the volume, and Gedney’s notes taken from older Sek speakers in Ban Atsamat, refer to original locations of Sek villages, but without much geographical precision since these are oral traditions, not based upon direct experience. Because the Sek language is particularly archaic in its preservation of consonant clusters, and since the languages most closely related to Sek are spoken primarily in Southern China, the origins of the Sek people are of great historical interest to the mainland of Southeast Asia, to the protohistory of the Tais, and to the ethnohistory of Vietnam. Therefore, in this paper I would like pursue further the issue of the origins of the Sek.

The Sek language has been described variously as belonging to the Northern Branch of Tai or to an earlier (pre-Proto Tai) broader grouping. The latter was the view of Gedney, one to which I subscribe and have illustrated in a dendrogram (Figure 1) first prepared in 1991(b). Also in 1991(c), I proposed that the Mènè language of Nghệ An Province in Vietnam, now also spoken in Borikhamxay Province in Laos, contains a substratum of Sek-like features, evidenced in vocabulary and in the tone system, which leads us to conclude that there was a Northern Tai (or closely related) group of languages located to the south of the Red River (Hồng) delta which must have originally formed a continuum from Guangxi to Thanh Hoá.
Figure 1. The main branchings of the Tai-Kadai ethnolinguistic family

In support of the continuum theory, additional evidence has surfaced in the form of the etymology of Tai ethnonyms and from Old Chinese historical sources to bring us to a point where the interpretation of other more northerly, in particular Chu, Chinese history is possible, at least from an ethnolinguistic perspective. Hopefully this will provide an ethno-historical frame into which additional data may be placed as it becomes available.

2This scheme is somewhat outdated on the Kadai side where data has been sparse. Jerold Edmondson (p.c.) now believes that Laha, Buyang, Ain and Qabiao are closer to Kam-Tai, while Hlai, Gelao, Cunhua and Lachi are independent groups descending directly from the parent language.
2. **Current locations of Sek and the Sách**

2.1 **The Sek**

The locations of the Sek in Thailand have been amply recorded by Gedney and others so that it is not necessary to repeat that information here. In Laos, however, despite the efforts of Morev (1988), the most important and oldest locations have not been identified until recently in Chamberlain (1996 and 1997) technical reports for development projects that have not been widely publicized.

Furthermore, it is now clear that there are two distinct dialects of Sek, one in the district of Khamkeut in Borikhamxay Province, and one in the Province of Khammouane. The dialect of Khamkeut emanates from the village of Na Kadok in the Subdistrict of Nam Veo who trace their origins to the village of Phu Quan (/fiu kwang/) located on a small western tributary of the Ngàn Sâu in the Đúc Tho administrative unit of Hà Tinh, Nghe An Province in Vietnam (just to the south of Vinh). According to villagers in Na Kadok, several families of Sek speakers still reside at this location. Speakers of this dialect are also found in Lak Xao Subdistrict, the villages of Ban Som Sanouk, Ban Nam Phao, and Ban Houay Toun; and in Khammouane Subdistrict, Ban Na Tham Kwang (or Ban Nam Hoy). [see Map 2]

The second Sek dialect, the one which is found in Thailand, comes originally from Nakai District in Khammouane Province, and is still spoken in four villages there: Ban Toeng (/tɔŋɔŋ/ in Gedney Text V), the subdistrict seat on the Nam Noy; Ban Na Meo; Ban Na Moey (/sin⁴ naa⁴ mɔɔy⁴/ in Text IV), and Ban Beuk (/beuk⁴ naa⁴ tɔŋ⁴/ in Text IV⁴). The last three are all located on the Nam Pheo, a tributary of the Nam Noy. During the time of the Siamese occupation, most of the Sek went to hide in Ban Kwat Chêo, between Ban Yang and Ban Lom across the border in Vietnam. The ones who didn’t were taken to Nakhon Phanom. The villagers at Na Meo say they have been living in their present location for 286 years. [see Map 2]

The Brou at Kounë (the last village on the Nam Pheo and the closest one to Vietnam) relate that names of former villages there were Ban Kiin and Ban Tông

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³Originally, the modern province of Borikhamxay was part of a larger Khammouane Province, the name of which was taken from the town of Khammouane. This same Khammouane town, formerly a provincial capital, is now a subdistrict in Khamkeuth District in Borikhamxay Province.

⁴/naa tɔŋ/ ‘southern paddy’ was actually a separate village, now abandoned, about 2 km. from Ban Beuk.

⁵Note that all of these villages are located in Laos, not in Vietnam as implied in the Gedney materials. (cf. Hudak, p. xx)

⁶From unpublished fieldnotes of Khammannh Siphanxay, Institute of Cultural Research, Lao PDR.