CHAPTER 13

CONSONANT MERGERS — A CLOSER LOOK

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In an earlier study, 'Consonant Mergers and Inscription One' (included as Chapter 3 in this volume) — henceforth CM — attention was given to the status of the symbols traditionally read as *kho' khuat* and *kho' khai* in Inscription One. That study (and this brief note) should not be taken as addressing the question of Inscription One's 'authenticity' in any sort of general terms, but rather as presenting a puzzle that those who suppose the inscription might have been written substantially after its traditional date would need to solve.

1. The 'tortoise' approach

The purpose is to illustrate how one particular rather technical issue in comparative Tai linguistics has bearing on the larger question. The particular *(kho' khuat)* case was selected because, in this instance, it seems feasible to portray the issues and treat a limited corpus of data in a way that might be accessible to non-specialists (in particular, to those with no direct training or special interest in technical procedures of the comparative method or of Tai diachronic linguistics).

Other issues certainly merit equal or probably more attention. In historical linguistics, an excellent preliminary study of the Sukhothai distribution of the letters *yo'-yak* and *yo'-ying* had been made by Duangduen Suwattee and Pranee Kullavanijaya (1976).[1] The consequences of their work might lead to a line of argument similar to what was proposed for *kho' khuat* and *kho' khai* in CM, and might add another, but similar, puzzle for 'late-

daters' to solve. In more historical - philological matters, whether a Sukhothai-era *tri:bu:n* - type wall would have necessarily had three sections or whether the word *na:ng* functioned as a title in Sukhothai times — and many similar questions — merit extended discussion and debate.

"Oh, get on with the main issue and stop worrying about microscopic and trivial matters!" — a critic of CM was heard to say. A main concern here is to counter that sentiment as being too superficial or ' hare-like:' what is needed in epigraphic and comparative-historical linguistic research is the opposite more 'tortoise-like' approach, devoting proper care to technical detail and fully analyzing and evaluating competing hypotheses. Of course, occasionally hares may leap to correct conclusions and tortoises may plod intc quagmires, but in historical linguistics and epigraphy the opposite scenario is far more likely.

2. What was argued in CM?

In CM a particular correlation involving two consonants was discussed and it was shown that the correlation could be interpreted, together with some other evidence, to shed some light on the age of Inscription One relative to other inscriptions. Other interpretations of the correlation might be possible, but they would need to be put forward. Below we summarize the points in CM, provide a brief update, and present some of the critical evidence so that readers may see and judge for themselves the validity of the argument.

Relying on careful work of Vickery (1987) analyzing Sukhothai spelling variation and developing lines of inquiry originally suggested by Burnay & Coedès (1927-28), CM called attention to the fact that some sixteen items on Inscription One spelled with consonants traditionally read as *kho' khuat* and as *kho' khai* have regular cognates in most Southwestern Tai varieties.

These items are shown in Table 1 and in the Appendix. As Table 1 indicates, items 1 - 10 (and also 16) have traditionally

been read by most authorities as spelled with *kho' khuat* on Inscription One (i.e. x in Table 1); items 11-15 (and also 17),[2] with *kho' khai* (i.e. kh in Table 1). We refer below for convenience to the 'traditional readings' as those of Cham Thongkhamwan (1976, i.e. CT in Table 1) which are also the readings used in CM. We return to alternate possibilities and have a closer look at the letter shapes in section 4.

Some Southwestern Tai varieties, such as White Tai, show two distinctive velar consonants for cognate items; for White Tai, a palatal consonant (*ts-* or [Ç]) is involved too, so the full correspondence pattern is two-to-three. ("Why concentrate so much on White Tai?" a critic asked. Answer: White Tai is the single relevant Southwestern Tai dialect for which an extensive and linguistically reliable dictionary is available: Dieu and Donaldson, 1970.) The 'traditional readings' of Inscription One show a distribution of *kho' khai* and *kho' khuat* in virtually complete agreement with the distinction in White Tai represented by Dieu and Donaldson as *kh* and *khh.* The former according to them indicates an aspirated stop and the latter, a velar fricative, phonetically identified by them as [x].

'Virtually complete agreement' above means in 15 cases out of 15, and barring a sixteenth cognate, the single apparent exception — 'tamarind' — for which there may be a plausible explanation in terms of dialect borrowing. More study of this exceptional case is warranted.

Why? How is this agreement of 15 items out of 15 to be explained?

CM argued that this could not be a mere coincidence. The correlation could not be due to chance alone, since the odds are simply too great: it would be equivalent to calling 'heads and tails' correctly fifteen times out of fifteen tosses ($p = 1/2^{15}$ or less than one chance in the ten thousand.) Now there may be a variety of explanations for this correlation, but the straightforward one developed in CM is that both the 'traditional readings' of the letters in question on Inscription One and the regular

White Tai distinction point back to an earlier stage of Southwestern Tai when two velar consonants were distinct phonemes. Work by Gedney (1979), superseding and to some extent correcting reconstructions proposed by Li (1977), provides the crucial basis for this diachronic interpretation. (We return to another 'scandalous' possibility for the 'traditional readings' and the '15-out - of-15' correlation in section 3.)

A second branch of the argument in CM (actually presented there first in sequence) builds on important work of Vickery (1987), who has demonstrated so convincingly that mid-and late 14th century Sukhothai incriptions show marked fluctuation with respect to items spelled with *kho' khai* and *kho' khuat.*

Vickery's original (1987) observations as to spelling variation are surely correct and still must stand as a characterization for the Sukhothai corpus, at least to judge from a survey of all published sources available to the writer. (It must be admitted that these sources are far from ideal for the type of close analysis demanded by the present project.) As noted in CM, particular inscriptions may vary somewhat in how consistently the *kho' khai / kho' khuat* distinction is maintained, but *taken as a whole,* the Sukhothai corpus strongly indicates that the distinction was gradually lost in the region, presumably through consonantal merger on an item-by-item basis — a merger that was probably completed by the early 15th century. Others have noticed the gradual deterioration of this particular spelling distinction as well; see Nantana Danvivathana (1987, p. 45 n. 2).

(Perhaps future revisions in this part of the argument may become necessary; for example, it is to be hoped that a new critical edition of the Sukhothai corpus — up to professional standards normal in epigraphy elsewhere — will be published before long. The presently available published plates and transcriptions of Sukhothai Inscriptions, other than Inscription One, fall short of the reliability and clarity needed to consider matters of orthographic detail effectively.)