CHAPTER 3

CONSONANT MERGERS AND INSRIPTION ONE*

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Inscription One of the Sukhothai corpus, traditionally ascribed to King Ramkhamhaeng, has provided its readers with interpretative work at least since King Mongkut brought it to general attention some 150 years ago. By now the inscription can claim a loose collection of ‘disciplinary readings.’ Historians, philologists, political scientists, etc., have contributed their ongoing interpretations based on particular professional interests, methods and preconceptions. In this brief note I hope to show how the perspectives of a comparative-historical linguist relating to one rather technical issue—the Sukhothai distribution of the consonant symbols kho' khai and kho' khuat—may contribute something of interest to readers of the inscription in other disciplines, thereby stimulating further study and debate.¹

According to Griswold and Prasert na Nagara, "the main body of the inscription, if we agree that it ends at the close of Face III, contains only one date, 1214 saka (1292 A.D.)...It seems certain that the whole of the first three faces was engraved in that year..."² Griswold & Prasert na Nagara also concur with Coedès’ opinion as to the commemorative purpose of the inscription.³

On the other hand, certain doubts about the inscription have also been expressed.⁴ Vickery, using a range of historical, philological and linguistic arguments, has in fact concluded that Inscription One is "a deliberate historical fake."⁵

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The citation of reconstructed proto-language forms by Vickery in advancing his argument represents a potential confluence of linguistic and historical interests and methods. This is to be welcomed. However for at least one set of linguistic relationships he discusses – centering on the status of the letter *kho' khuat* in Sukhothai inscriptions – straightforward inspection of the data along comparative-historical lines fails to strengthen Vickery's argument. Rather, the evidence Vickery calls attention to actually weakens his case considerably and presents an interpretive puzzle to those who would assign to Inscription One a date substantially (say, several centuries) later than the traditional one.\(^6\)

An important earlier proposal regarding the consonants *kho' khai* and *kho' khuat* was presented in this journal sixty years ago by Burnay & Coedès (1927-28). They called attention to the occurrence of symbols for the two consonants in Sukhothai inscriptions and surmised, partly on the basis of such comparative evidence as was available then, that the symbols must have represented velar fricative sounds subsequently lost in varieties like Central Thai, Lao, etc. A similar line of argument is found in several subsequent reconstructions, such as those of Egerod (1961) and Brown (1965), although details differ.\(^7\)

For purposes below we take up separately (I.) more 'philological' evidence: how consistently an orthographic distinction between (*süng*-class) letters *kho' khai* and *kho' khuat* has been made in earlier Thai writing; then (II.) more 'linguistic' evidence: how relevant cognate vocabulary items appear in modern Tai varieties and what this evidence suggests in terms of reconstruction following the rather strict principles of diachronic linguistics known as the comparative method. Finally (III.) the two strands of evidence will be assessed together.

The situation with (*tam*-class) *kho' khwai* and *kho' khon* is to some extent parallel– but differs crucially in that the contrast separating this latter pair, unlike the former one, survives rather widely in modern dialects just to the north of Sukhothai (e.g. in Lanna and Shan varieties, where the contrast is preserved as (k-) versus (kh-) for items having *tam*-class tones).\(^8\) This sur-
vival of contrast (although probably not of the actual sounds involved in making the contrast in former times) has quite specific consequences for the present line of argument. It means that the latter pair of (tam-class) consonants cannot provide evidence of the sort directly relevant to establishing, in a relative way, the chronology involved in loss of a distinctive (phonemic) opposition. Data involving kho' khai and kho' khuat, on the other hand, provide just this type of evidence.

(I.) Looking first at the orthographic situation, we find that Inscription One differs from certain others in the Sukhothai corpus in an important respect: it shows complete internal consistency in its use of kho' khai and kho' khuat for the items in these initials occurring more than once. There are more than forty relevant repetitive occurrences on the inscription, with nearly twenty lexical items involved in the recurrences. Some of these items occur only twice each, but at least five items occur upwards of four times each. In all such cases there is complete consistency as to initial consonant: there is no spelling variation at all in making this particular orthographic distinction.9

Note however a degree of inconsistent spelling on Inscription One for certain other consonants, e.g. for /s-/ as well as for several vowels. 'Consistency for the sake of consistency' alone does not thus appear to have been an 'overriding obsession' for the writer (s) of the inscription. This lends support to interpreting the kho' khai/kho' khuat orthographic distinction as one representing sounds actually pronounced as contrastively (i.e. phonemically) distinct by Inscription One's contemporaries; that is, the distinction was at that time a practical, natural and functional one. The salience of the distinction for speakers at the time of the inscription is especially convincing in the case of several minimal pairs distinguished in spelling when the inscription was written (but pronounced and spelled the same way today as total homonym-homographs). These include khap (D1) 'drive' (spelled with kho' khai) and khap (D1) 'sing' (spelled on Inscription One with kho' khuat and hence, as we see below, presumably distinguished in pronunciation as (xap) or the like).10 From strictly internal considerations of orthographic
practice, it is hard to see *kho' khuat* on Inscription One as being "used quite randomly" or as being "a meaningless allograph."11

Now as Vickery has clearly shown, for other inscriptions of the Sukhothai corpus, random allography is a very reasonable description for *kho' khuat*'s distribution. On Inscription Two, for example, the form *khao* (C1) 'enter' appears some ten times, most frequently spelled with *kho' khai*, but several times spelled with *kho' khuat*; in one sentence the word occurs three times, once spelled with the former consonant, twice with the latter.12 The same alternation occurs on Inscription Five, and similar alternations occur frequently elsewhere.13 Most other inscriptions in the Sukhothai corpus strongly favour *kho' khai*, with *kho' khuat* appearing only rarely and sporadically, if at all. Vickery calls attention to an inscription as early as the 1330's that does not contain *kho' khuat* at all.14 For these inscriptions we can safely follow him in concluding that *kho' khuat*, if it occurs at all, indeed has a "meaningless allograph" status.

Inscription Three, which mentions the date 1357 A.D., is more consistent than the others in its use of *kho' khuat/kho' khai*, and respective items generally agree with spellings in Inscription One when comparison is possible. (Several items on each inscription do not occur on the other.) There are a few discrepancies: e.g., the initial of *khao* (C1) 'enter' varies between these inscriptions.

From strictly internal considerations, the most straightforward interpretation of the above orthographic data is surely *that the spelling of Inscription One reflects a contrastive (phonemic) distinction between sounds represented on it as *kho' khai* and *kho' khuat*. Inscription Three and perhaps several other briefer texts of the same general mid-fourteenth century period show essentially the same contrast, with some item-by-item replacements.*

*Other inscriptions represent subsequent stages when (or perhaps specific writers for whom) the contrast is being lost—i.e., where the two sounds are in process of merger. This is attested to by spelling confusion—ultimately with *kho' khuat* demoted to