CHAPTER 14

THE SUKHOTHAI INSCRIPTION SEEN FROM THE MIDDLE MEKHONG VALLEY

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1. Introduction

As a non-specialist in epigraphy the writer is not directly involved in the actual debate on the Sukhothai Inscription of King Ram Khamhaeng (1292). But my attention was coincidentally attracted to the stèle while engaged in work on Lao cultural origins entitled Contribution Ethno-historique à la Connaissance de la Culture Louang - Prabanaise. As the title indicates, the methodology of this work is ethno-historical, that is, it utilizes anthropological and historical data. In the field of history, the researcher has benefited from T. Hoshino's work (1976) which is based notably on Chinese and Vietnamese texts and chronicles and which has offered a renewed historical vision of Laos and neighboring countries.

The main purpose of this present paper is to compare the historical situation in the Middle Mekhong valley around 1292 with the contents of the Sukhothai inscription. The tentative conclusions are as follows:

1. The findings seem to be in accordance with the contents of the inscription, notably concerning the conquest made by King Ram Khamhaeng of the Middle Mekhong valley;

2. In addition, Sukhothai's influence may have reached the Tai of Tonking (North Vietnam) in that period;

3. According to the Chinese and Vietnamese sources, it seems that the aforesaid conquest was undertaken jointly by Mongolian and Sukhothai armies.
We will examine successively the regional context around 1292, the contents of the inscription, and the relevant local data.

2. The Regional Context Around 1292

For a little over a century (1253-1368), the history of Yunnan and mainland Southeast Asia was dominated by the Mongols. Nevertheless, from their conquest of Dali in 1253 through the foundation of the Ming dynasty in 1368, the administration of their territories was not easy and they were faced with local rebellions.

From the conquest of Dali through the foundation of Chiang Mai by King Mangrai (1296), the events in Yunnan and mainland Southeast Asia can be summarized into the following stages:

2.1 Conquest and pacification of Yunnan: having conquered in 1225 the Kingdom of Dali (the successor of the Nan Zhao Empire), the Mongols pacified all of Yunnan and from there attacked neighboring countries such as the Kin Che ("Golden Teeth") or Shan States who belonged to the Pagan Kingdom; probably the Sip Song Panna (Hoshino 1976: 51); and the Dai Co Viet (Vietnam). These conquests and pacifications continued until 1257. The displacement in 1262 of King Mangrai's capital from Hiranya Ngoen Yang (Chiang Saen) to Chiang Rai was perhaps related to the above events.

2.2 A relaxing of Mongol domination: for one decade between 1270 and 1280, because of their efforts to conquer all of China, the Mongols loosened their rule in Yunnan. In the same period it can be seen that King Mangrai expanded his power to the west and to the east, founding Chiang Khong in 1269 and Fang in 1273. In Burma, the "Golden Teeth" were reconquered by Pagan in 1277.

2.3 The conquest of mainland Southeast Asia: having conquered all of China the Mongols founded the Yuan Dynasty in 1279. Then they had the opportunity to devote themselves to mainland Southeast Asian affairs. Between 1281 and 1285, they attacked
and subjugated Dai Co Viet, Zhan Cheng (Champa), and Cambodia.

According to the *Si Yi Guang Ji*, the capital of Zhan Cheng, Da Zhou, was situated in the middle valley of the Mekhong River. We had identified this city as Dhatu Phanom (Doré: 584 - 5). But the local king's and crown prince's titles, *Bei You Bu La Zhe Wu* and *Bu Di Li (Fu) Ka*, respectively identified by Hoshino (1976: 233) as “Phraya Phao Raja” and “Phra Tulaka,” suggest that the area under control of the Zhan Cheng in that period reached Central Laos.2 This indicates that sometime after Jayavarman VII's death, dated by Coedès (1964: 329) at about 1218, Champa had replaced Cambodia in spreading its power to this part of the Middle Mekhong valley.

According to the *Yuan Shi*, Da Zhou was conquered in the period 1282 - 1284. The *Si Yi Guang Ji* specifies that the Mongolian General Sogotu led this campaign and that a new province was founded. In 1283, as in Dali since 1260, a *zhong guan* (deputy governor) was appointed to Zhan Cheng. Liu Jin was chosen. Hoshino (226) thinks that the name Liu Jin, pronounced “Lao Kham” in Cantonese, can be identified as “Ram(a) Kam-(haeng).” In this respect, it would seem that in the territories under their control, the Mongols retained the local prince in his position with the title of *mo he cuo* (from Pali maharaj), while at the same time integrating the latter into their administrative system as deputy governor.

In 1287, the Mongols conquered the Kingdom of Pagan, and having subdued Jinghong in 1290, they subjugated all of Sip Song Panna and the northern part of Lanna (Chiang Saen - Chiang Rai) in 1290-1296. These regions were renamed “Great Cheli” and “Little Cheli” respectively. Jinghong became the Mongol prefect's headquarters (Hoshino 58).

The foundation in 1296 of Chiang Mai, the “new city” to the south of Fang, by King Mangrai seems to be a direct consequence of the above mentioned events. The Mongols called Mangrai's kingdom Ba Bai.
2.4 The Tai rebellion: immediately after Chiang Mai’s founding in 1297, King Mangrai counter-attacked, invading Cheli and Burma. This operation promoted a general rebellion in southern Yunnan against the Mongol rule. The Mongols were unable to bring the situation under control until about 1312 - 1315 (Hoshino: 61).

3. The Contents of the Sukhothai Inscription

According to the fourth face of the inscription, Sukhothai’s tributary peoples were the “Ma, Kao, Lao, and the Thai of Muang Tai Laa-Faa (country-under-the-sky)...the Thai peoples of the (Nam) Ou River and of the (Nam) Khong River.”

The Ma and the Kao were probably the inhabitants of the Mae Nam Nan River. The Lao in question were certainly those of Vieng Chan-Vieng Kham (Vientiane) and of Sua (Louang-Phrabang). In fact, these two cities are mentioned in the following passage of the inscription as dependants of Sukhothai. The Thais of the Mae Nam Ou and the Mekhong rivers are the Tai Lue of Northern Laos and Sip Song Panna. The Thai of Muang Tai Laa - Faa, which Coedès (1964: 360, n. 4) supposed to be those in China, are still questionable. Indeed, the Tai Dam chronicle, Quam To Muang (section 1), regards Muang Om Muang Ai, which are located in Sip Song Panna, as being “outside of the Muang Tai Laa-Faa,” indicating that the Tai Dam are living in the latter. In that respect, Sukhothai’s domination would have reached through Louang Phrabang to the western part of Tonking.

In order to further explore the contents of this part of the inscription, let us examine some local data of Lan Xang and Sip Song Chou Tai (Tonking).

4. Local Data

4.1 Anthropological data from the local chronicles: in the anthropological field, the following data have to be investigated: