Typology and language contact phenomena in Southeast Asia

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1. Introduction. One of the important long-term demographic trends in mainland E and SE Asia has been the southern expansion of the Chinese or Han people.1 As an early result of this Völkerwanderung, Southeast Asian languages were subject before the third century BC to distant contact with the Chinese language and, through the fortunes of war, to much more direct contact after that time. But despite considerable influence and intercultural exchange among the local and Han populations few true pidgin and creole languages have resulted.2 So it is that the result of contact has led more to areal resemblance (as is found in South Asia and the Balkans) than to creole languages (as seen in Oceania, the Caribbean, and West Africa). That is to say, there has been a reduction of typological distance among languages spoken here without the breakdown and resynthesis characteristic of creoles. Specifically, lessening typological distance has meant that the head-first languages of SE Asia (SVO/Pr/NG/NA) have taken on traits of Chinese, in some aspects a head-last language (SVO/Pr/GN/AN). In yet other words, contact has not resulted in breakdown and reassembly in the manner of fission creolization but rather there has been a tendency toward fusion creolization of two or more fully-fledged languages, (Markey 1981). The mixing of Han and local languages has also resulted in borrowings, touching

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2Except for those that have resulted between Asians and peoples from outside the area, e.g. English, French, Arabic, Mongolian, or Tibetan speakers.
mostly the lexical level, and instances of language shift, where the grammatical and phonological levels are affected. This paper will examine some examples that illustrate these features of contact and study where these languages fall on Thomason and Kaufman 1988 scales of intercultural communication.

It is a major claim of Thomason and Kaufman 1988 that borrowing, shift, fusion, convergence as well as genetic inheritance leave distinctive tracks and, moreover, the social historical matrix in which the area is embedded will be an important factor in shaping these traces as well. Obviously, in light of the complexity of East and Southeast Asia an account can be attempted only in broadest terms. Still, after surveying the area of south China and the borderlands of northern Vietnam the following picture emerges:

(1) a. Pidgin and creole languages did not develop in the SE Asia area because the Han language expanded relatively slowly into the south and this expansion occurred sufficiently in the past to mitigate many of the obvious features of mixing.

b. There is evidence of borrowing, shift, and fusion that led in time to the promotion of linguistic tone and register in virtually every language in every language group so that it has become the quintessential feature of the entire geographic area, whether or not the languages of the area originally possessed such prosodies.

c. The degree of contact between Chinese and other groups has, by and large, resulted in borrowing of cultural terms with some structural, grammatical influences. There are a small number of cases of languages with more dramatic traces of deeper contact.

The languages studied will include Vietnamese, Tai, and Kam-Sui languages of SE Asia.

2. The conquest of the South. For the East and Southeast Asian area we have a relatively rich written historical record of the events large expanses of time, though virtually all of it reflects the perspective of Han administrators and historians. In the last twenty-five years, archeological finds have helped us to attain a more balanced view of the cultural and linguistic situation in the south. All evidence, whether new or old, confirms one main trend, cf. Fitz Gerald (1972/1993), that the population,
the ideas, the culture, and the political power of the Chinese have been moving southward for more than 3000 years. In the times of Confucius (500 BC), the citizenry of the ancient confederation was already penetrating into the C(entral) P(lains) of the Yangtze valley. Expansion halted, though, in the Zhou Dynasty when armed conflict broke out among several distinct groups of the CP in what Chinese scholars call the 战国 Zhanguo ‘The Warring States Period’. During this time all parties recruited mercenaries from among the Bai Yue 百越 or Hundred Viets living outside Chinese borders to the south in mountainous territory called Lingnan 岭南 ‘South of the Passes’ (contemporary Guangdong, Guangxi, and northern Vietnam). Grave goods from this time found in archeological digs show a progressive accumulation of CP weaponry as far south as northern Guangxi, cf. Barlow 2000. The CP wars may thus have drawn significant numbers of the male population away from their homelands and thereby engendered in Lingnan the transformation of the state into a spartan political system along strong military lines as well as the emergence of a kind ‘foreign legion Chinese’. This new state replaced an earlier theocratic social organization possessing an absolute deity, as there was an acute need to defend Bai Yue territory with depleted male resources. In 221 BC the situation in Lingnan changed forever.

In that year, the state of Qin lead by a clever, iron-fisted sovereign Qin Shihuangdi 秦始皇帝, builder of the Great Wall, wrested control over the entire CP territory. After consolidating power, he was no longer satisfied simply to use southern forces as canon fodder in distant conflicts but wished to bring their native soil under direct Chinese domination. Accordingly, he dispatched his general Zhao Tuo 赵佗 to seize Lingnan up to the Red River valley of Vietnam, which Zhao Tuo accomplished, but only after stiff resistance from hordes of Yue boatmen fighting in their own territory with poison arrows. Thus was established the Kingdom of Nam Việt 南越 with Zhao Tuo as emperor.

After the collapse of Zhao Tuo’s descendents, resistance to Han administration was fierce and China lost control of this territory. But again in 111 BC Nam Việt submitted to the Chinese Empire, whereupon the name was changed to Giao Chí or Jiao Zhi 交趾. Since Giao Chí was the seat of government for nine commandaries or garrisons, there must have been many
Chinese soldiers there (Ma 1882:308). The infusion of Han cultural values recommenced but not without challenge. The native hierarchy of Giao Chỉ went into a final fatal and short-lived armed revolt in AD 43 led significantly by two women, the sisters Trưng. By the end of the Latter Han Dynasty, circa AD 200, the southern Provinces of Fujian, Guangdong, and Guangxi as well as Northern Vietnam passed from a state of military occupation into civil governance. While there was still large-scale resistance to Han administration, a new presumably bilingual hierarchy of Han-Viet and Han-Zhuang gentry had replaced the old order at the centers of power.

Still, the territory south of the Yangtze was very large, mountainous, filled with noxious malarial vapors, magical practices, exotic plants and animals such as kingfishers, elephants, the Asian rhinoceros, red bats, crocodiles, peacocks, muntjacs, pythons, galangal, cardamom, and cinnamon. And, it was also an area of extreme cultural and linguistic diversity with still resistant representatives of the language families, Miao-Yao, Kam-Tai, Tibeto-Burman, and Mon-Khmer. Northern Chinese found it difficult to withstand the diseases of the swamps and the poison darts of the locals, Schafer 1967. Much territory was only nominally under control. Ruling this vast area was one thing, settling it another, Fitz Gerald (1972/1993:xvii).

Before the Conquest of the South there had been an empire and southern culture of people called the Great L(i)ao, successors of the Bai Yue. The Liao are considered today to be the forbearers of the Thai, Zhuang, Lao, etc. The Great Liao were called by various names by the Chinese, including Pu 濮, Man 蛮, or Yue 越. When the Qin Dynasty was toppled by the Han in 205 BC, chronicles report that the Pu, Man, and Yue were all of one cultural type, namely all were in reality Liao 燕.

2.1. The short leash policy. In the eyes of the Han Emperors their forces had advanced far into a hostile area where they were decidedly in the minority. The population of the Liao in south China was, in fact, such a great majority that the Qin conquerors and Han occupiers after them pursued a policy now infamously remembered as “keep them on a short leash” jime zhengci 羁縻政策. In practical terms this policy amounted to moving them away from coastal areas, assimilating them, and placating them simultaneously. Qin and Han rulers thus put in