EVIDENCE FOR ANOTHER SERIES OF VOICED INITIALS IN PROTO-TAI

Languages and dialects of the Northern branch of the Tai family are spoken in southern China, in the southern part of Kweichow and adjacent parts of Kwangsi to the east and Yunnan to the west, with a small spillover across the border into Vietnam. Saek, spoken much farther south, in a few villages near Nakhon Phanom in northeastern Thailand, and across the river in Laos in a few villages near Tha Khek, is an outlying member of the Northern Tai group.

Over a considerable extent of the Northern Tai domain the speakers call themselves and their language by a name which has been variously romanized as Dioi, I, Yi, Giay, Jui, Yay. These variants reflect dialectal differences in the pronunciation of the name, as well as differing practices in romanization. The Chinese term Chuang is applied to some varieties of Northern Tai, but also includes some non-Northern Tai dialects.

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Data are available on a good many varieties of Northern Tai speech. The following are the most useful sources of information. The earliest important publication on a Northern Tai language, still much used, was a Diao dictionary of a dialect in southern Kweichow by French missionaries (Esquirol and Williatte 1908). We are indebted to Fang-kuei Li for a fine monograph on the dialect of Wu-ming, at the eastern extreme of the Northern Tai area (Li 1956). The Chinese have produced a Chuang-Chinese dictionary, based on the Wu-ming dialect (Kwangsi People's Press 1960), and for several years a Chuang edition of the magazine China Pictorial was published in the dialect and the system of romanization of this dictionary. F. K. Li has published articles dealing with the dialect of Po-ai, in eastern Yunnan (Li 1957a, 1957b), and his recent Handbook of Comparative Tai (Li 1977) contains copious Po-ai data. The Chinese have described the dialects of forty geographical points in southern Kweichow, with tables giving the local forms for some hundreds of words (Chinese Academy of Sciences 1959). I have done fieldwork on Yay, a form of Northern Tai speech spoken in the neighborhood of Lao Kai in Vietnam near the Chinese border (Gedney 1965). Saek has been studied by A. G. Haudricourt (Haudricourt 1958, 1963) and by myself (Gedney 1970a).

Except for such outliers as Saek, the Northern Tai area may well be a single dialect continuum, without sharp internal linguistic boundaries. Available sources, however, provide us only with data from various scattered points or small areas, so that at
the present stage of our knowledge we are forced to deal with these as different languages or dialects.

The term Northern Tai, or the Northern branch of the Tai family, is F. K. Li's; other scholars have sometimes used other terms, but we will follow Li's usage. In Li's view, the Tai family has three main branches, this Northern one and two others, which he designates Central (spoken in the extreme northeast of Vietnam and adjacent areas across the Chinese border in Kwangsi) and Southwestern (including the well-known Tai languages of northwestern Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Burma, Assam, and parts of Yunnan).

Since we will be mainly concerned in this paper with differences between Northern Tai and the rest of the Tai family (Li's Central and Southwestern branches taken together), we will for the sake of convenience use the term Southerr Tai to refer to all the non-Northern Tai languages. This cover term, Southern Tai, for Central and Southwestern Tai may be regarded by some as awkward, ambiguous, or misleading; they are asked to keep in mind that it is intended only for temporary use in discussing the matters with which we are dealing.

Northern Tai languages, as scholars have long recognized, exhibit many striking differences from Southern Tai, some lexical and some phonological. Lexical differences involve quite a large number of items for which the Northern Tai languages all use one word, but the Southern Tai languages another. Phonological differences are many, involving especially vowels and tones. The vocalic nuclei in Northern Tai, which do not correspond neatly with
those found in the same words in Southern Tai, have been the main reason that scholars have had more trouble trying to reconstruct a satisfactory vowel system for Proto-Tai than they have had in dealing with the consonants and tones.

Tonal differences between Northern and Southern Tai are of various sorts. In some cases it is necessary to reconstruct different tones in the parent language for the same word in Northern and Southern Tai. In other cases we must infer different original initial consonants, resulting in different tones in the modern languages of the two branches.

It is generally believed that the parent language of the Tai family, Proto-Tai, had a system of three tones on syllables ending in a voiced sound (vowel, semivowel, or nasal), designated by F. K. Li as A B C, and, on syllables ending with a voiceless sound (p t k), a fourth tone, D, which perhaps should be regarded as not a tone at all, since in syllables of this type there was no tonal differentiation. In the course of time, some centuries after the break-up of the parent language and geographical dispersal of the various branches, a set of tonal splits occurred (in Tai as well as in other tonal language families of the Far East and Southeast Asia), each split conditioned by phonetic features of the initial consonants. Each Tai language or dialect made different splits, and these differences have been of the greatest value to scholars in reconstructing the phonological system of the prehistoric parent language, as well as the phonological history of each language.