SPECULATIONS ON EARLY TAI TONES

In a paper contributed to the Tenth International Conference on Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics in 1977, E. G. Pulleyblank discussed the theory that the so-called rising tone of Middle Chinese originally had final glottal stop *ʔ*, and the so-called departing tone had final *s*, later *h*.[1] He credits A. G. Haudricourt with having first advanced this theory. In the course of his paper Pulleyblank points out (pp. 2-3) that at the time Burmese was reduced to writing, that language also appears to have had one tone ending in glottal stop and another ending in aspiration.

There is some evidence, admittedly meager and inconclusive, that the Tai languages, or at least some of them, at a period before the series of great tonal splits occurred in the various Tai languages and dialects (sometimes estimated at about a thousand years ago), similarly had, besides the plain tone, one tone ending in glottal stop and another

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ending in *h*. It is the purpose of this paper to call attention to this evidence, for what it is worth.

Most students of comparative Tai reconstruct for the parent language of the family a tone system consisting of three contrasting tones, called A, B, and C by F. K. Li, on syllables ending in a vowel or sonorant (nasal or semivowel), and a fourth category, D, ending in a voiceless stop *p*, *t*, or *k*, which showed no tonal differentiation. This tonal system must be assumed to have persisted for some time, perhaps several centuries, down to the time when each branch of the family underwent tonal splits, since in each of the daughter languages and dialects the tonal splits, although differing from place to place, are always found to have had the ABCD tonal system as the starting point. We will discuss first the evidence that the C tone of early Tai involved a final glottal stop *ʔ*, and then the evidence that the B tone of early Tai ended in *h*.

F. K. Li has postulated three branches for the Tai language family, a Northern branch spoken mainly in parts of southern China, a Central branch, which includes dialects (Tho, Nung, and so on) in the extreme northeastern part of Vietnam and adjacent areas in China, and a Southwestern branch, which includes the Tai dialects of northwestern Vietnam such as White, Black, and Red Tai, the Lue dialects of Yunnan, and all the Tai languages and dialects of the areas that are now Thailand, Laos, Burma, and Assam, including also the so-called Chinese Shan dialects in areas of Yunnan adjacent to Burma.[2] This tripartite classification of Tai languages is

practically very convenient, and has been widely used, but some, including myself, have had doubts as to the validity of the division between his Central and Southwestern branches, suspecting rather that the Tai family originally split into two branches, Li's Northern on the one hand, and on the other hand a group comprising his Central and Southwestern branches. Li's evidence for his three-way classification is, essentially, that his three branches are about equally different from each other phonologically and lexically. The case for a two-way classification has never been thoroughly worked out, but it appears likely that it would turn out to rest on two main points: first, evidence that between Li's Central and Southwestern branches there is no sharp boundary, but only gradual dialectal transition (this would be in the area about halfway across the northern part of Vietnam, for which available data are scanty); and second, an attempt to demonstrate that a single intermediate language can be reconstructed for Li's Central and Southwestern branches taken together. If it turns out that the suggested two-way division is correct, then one would probably have to conclude that the reason Li found such marked differences between his Central and Southwestern groups was that he was dealing with two extreme ends of a dialect continuum. This whole question is an important aspect of comparative Tai linguistics that awaits further study.

In virtually all modern Tai languages and dialects belonging to Li's Central and Southwestern branches, the tones (usually two) that have developed

from the earlier C tone are characterized by glottal constriction, sometimes called "creaky voice." This usually, perhaps always, is manifested by extreme tension of the glottis throughout the vowel, increasing gradually, with closure in glottal stop at the end of the syllable before pause or open juncture. When another syllable follows in close juncture, the glottal stop is omitted. The effect of creakiness in the vowel seems to result from intermittent voicing.

For example, the standard Thai language of Thailand (sometimes called Siamese) has two tones that have developed from the earlier C tone, the falling tone in words like *hâa* 'five' or *bâan* 'village', and the high tone in words like *máa* 'horse' or *máay* (from earlier *máy*) 'wood'. All words having either of these two tones and ending in a vowel or sonorant are accompanied by this glottal constriction. I have found in my own fieldwork on some dozens of dialects of Li's Southwestern and Central branches of Tai, from all the various geographical areas, that it is almost always the case that the tones that have developed from the earlier C tone have this feature. These glottalized tones may have any pitch level or contour. In Siamese, as we have just seen, they are falling and high, respectively. In White Tai they are low rising and low falling. At Lungming in Kwangsi they are mid level and low falling-rising.

In his fine study of the dialects of Thailand, including also a few Shan and Lao dialects, J. Marvin Brown in his tone charts represents this feature of glottalization by a squiggly line.[3] He also found