

# Outlying Kam-Tai: notes on Ta Mit Laha

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## 1. Introduction

In 1942 Paul K. Benedict wrote of the “Kadai stock”, which he has sometimes since called the outlier languages, that they had received scant attention from anthropologists and linguists.<sup>1</sup> Regrettably, that assessment about Qabiao (Laqua or Pubiao), Laha, Lhai, Lachi, and Gelao remains still largely true today. In this paper to honor our friend and colleague we offer notes from the field concerning perhaps the least-known of these five outliers, namely Laha, in its least described variety, which is Laha of Tà Mít Township of Lào Cai Province in Vietnam. We briefly report here some preliminary observations on the sound system of this language along with some sample comparisons with forms in the Kam-Tai stock and other outlier languages of Kadai such as Gelao, Lachi, and Qabiao—questions with which Professor Benedict has been concerned for half a century.

Information about the Laha language of Vietnam has until relatively recently been unavailable to Kadai researchers. At the turn of the century there were reports by the French and in the 70's a visit was paid to Laha areas by Professor André Haudricourt. Information in *Đặng Nghiêm Vạn et al. 1972* is generally regarded as being the earliest work about Laha by Vietnamese scholars. The most extensive recent source on Laha is the Russian language publication by Solntseva and *Hoàng Văn Ma 1986*, which primarily describes the variety spoken in *Sơn La* Province. Laha is also the focus of work in *Hoàng Văn Ma 1988*. In China a language or language group close to Laha, known as Paha or Buyang, is discussed by Professor Liang Min 1990 and even more recently by Li Jinfang 1996a and 1996b.

The name Laha has not always been clearly distinguished from Laqua (also known as Pen-ti Lolo, Pupéo, or Qabiao). For instance, Professor *Cầm Trọng*, a Vietnamese ethnologist (*Hoàng Văn Ma, 1992:10*) has opined that *Laha* and *Laqua* are in fact variants of the same name. But whether or not the two designations share a common origin, the languages of the Laha and the Laqua (henceforth referred to herein by their autonym, Qabiao) are not, in fact, a single language, as shown by the work of *Hoàng Văn Ma* and our own data. Having

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said this, however, it may still be observed that among the outliers there is some evidence that Laha and Qabiao share certain features not reflected in other outlier languages.

The Laha language is spoken in Vietnam at a somewhat greater distance from the Chinese border than its four sister outlier languages, whereas Buyang in China is spoken in areas of Yunnan and Guangxi Provinces just north of the Vietnam-China border. The Laha population in Vietnam was 1,394 according to the 1989 census data, (SDSRV 1991) and in China they are estimated to number about 2,000 (Li 1996a:1). The Buyang speakers in China also report that they have relatives now living in Phongsaly Province in Laos, though, to our knowledge, no linguistic information exists to describe such a group. In Vietnam there are two general settlement areas, one in Thuận Châu, Quỳnh Nhai, and Mường La Districts, especially at Bản Bung and a second in Sơn La Province in Lào Cai Province at Than Uyên District Tà Mít Township, 50-60 km to the northwest, Ma (1988:131). The Sơn La speakers refer to themselves as *Khla Phlao* or *Laha Phlao*, the 'Dry Laha,' and the Lào Cai Ta Mít speakers refer to themselves as *Laha Ung* [la<sup>33</sup>ha<sup>21</sup>ʔuŋ<sup>31</sup>], the 'Wet Laha' (EMPV 1978:243), referring presumably to whether these groups plant wet fields or grow only dry hill rice. All the villages in Vietnam are located on or near the Nậm Mu River, possibly the original migratory link between otherwise separated communities.

The data reported here were obtained from Mr. Hoàng Văn Phòm, 26 years of age from Lào Cai Province, Than Uyên District, Tà Mít Township, Bản Muot Village. From him we learned that in Than Uyên District there are eight villages of Laha in Lào Cai, said to number more than 1,000 speakers. They are surrounded by Black Thai speakers and virtually everyone is bilingually competent in that language as well as their own first language. According to EMPV (1978:243-48), the Laha presence is thought to have antedated the arrival of the Black Thai in this area in the 11-12th century, based on references to the presence of the ancestors of the Laha in old Black Thai script records. The prior presence of the Laha is also supported both in oral tradition and by the contemporary more advantageous location of the Laha villages relative to those of the Thai—with Laha villages being located closest to the river on the best available land, with the Thai villages more distant from the river.

As for the historical demographics of the close linguistic relatives of the Laha in China, Li 1996a reports that groups, commonly known by their Zhuang exonym as *Buyang* 布央 were once found in a variety of locations further to the north and east of their current settlement areas on the Vietnam-China borderlands. Indeed, there is an apparent north-east to south-west migration vector, as noted elsewhere (Edmondson and Li 1996), that would place the Vietnam Laha communities as an ancient vanguard that exited China along what we have called the "language corridor". That the Laha/Buyang were once much more numerous than their present population of 5,000 is perhaps reflected in the widespread toponyms involving the form 央 *yang*, as suggested in Li 1996a. This territory stretches across the southwestern border areas of Guizhou Province and the adjacent areas in Guangxi Province in a band from Tianlin County in the east to Longlin County in the west and from Nanning City in the east to Napo County in the west. The designation *yang* or, possibly *lang*, referred to a group in Chinese chronicles as

descendants of the 百越, Bách Việt, or Hundred Yue, a conglomerate of peoples south of the Yangtze in pre-Han times.

In China the Buyang at Yunnan Guangnan Yanglian and Anshe Villages call themselves *pa<sup>33</sup> ha<sup>33</sup>*. The following sample comparisons suggest how close the Laha of Vietnam and the Paha Buyang of China appear to be:

	<b>Laha</b>	<b>Paha</b>		<b>Laha</b>	<b>Paha</b>		<b>Laha</b>	<b>Paha</b>
‘one’	tɕam <sup>31</sup>	tsam <sup>45</sup>	‘two’	sa <sup>343</sup>	θa <sup>322</sup>	‘three’	qu <sup>343</sup>	tu <sup>322</sup>
‘four’	pa <sup>343</sup>	pa <sup>322</sup>	‘five’	ma <sup>33</sup>	ṃha <sup>33</sup>	‘six’	dam <sup>343</sup>	nam <sup>31</sup>
‘seven’	tho <sup>343</sup>	ru <sup>33</sup>	‘eight’	ma <sup>33</sup>	mu <sup>31</sup>	‘nine’	so <sup>33</sup>	ɕha <sup>33</sup>
				hu <sup>33</sup>			wa <sup>24</sup>	
‘ten’	pət <sup>23</sup>	vat <sup>55</sup>	‘rain’	zen <sup>33</sup>	zin <sup>31</sup>	‘star’	ma <sup>343</sup>	roŋ <sup>31</sup>
							luŋ <sup>33</sup>	
‘salt’	ɲɔ <sup>33</sup>	ɲu <sup>31</sup>	‘bird’	ma <sup>33</sup>	nok <sup>11</sup>	‘ear’	ka <sup>33</sup>	ka <sup>322</sup>
				nək <sup>33</sup>			hu <sup>33</sup>	
‘mouth’	mɔɔn <sup>24</sup>	mam <sup>31</sup>	‘eye’	ma <sup>33</sup>	ma <sup>0</sup>	‘beard’	not <sup>32</sup>	mut <sup>11</sup>
				ta <sup>33</sup>	da <sup>33</sup>			
‘blood’	pat <sup>32</sup>	pe <sup>33</sup>	‘bone’	thak <sup>32</sup>	daŋ <sup>322</sup>	‘liver’	qap <sup>32</sup>	tap <sup>55</sup>

## 2. Ta Mit Laha

In this paper we present very preliminary results from a field trip to one Laha area completed only days before the writing of this paper. Our analysis is consequently still very preliminary.

The language at Ta Mit has a sizable number of two syllable words and six tones. Syllable codas /-p -t -k -m -n -ŋ -i -u/ occur. Laha is also one of only two languages known to preserve the final *-l*, which in Ta Mit has changed to *-n*, but is attested as *-l* in Laha Phlao of Nong Lay. Vowel length is distinguished in syllables that end in one of these six sounds. Laha has six tonal contrasts in syllables ending in vowels and that includes two tonal contrasts in syllables ending in /-p -t -k/. Generally then, Laha Ung demonstrates a greater number of disyllabic words (Benedict’s dyadic forms), whereas Laha Phlao has monosyllables with clusters (Benedict’s monadic forms), cf. Benedict 1992.

### 2.1 The initials

Ta Mit Laha has a rather asymmetric pattern of initial consonants with five points of articulation and four manners in stops:

p	t <sup>2</sup>	tɕ	k	ʔ
ʔb	ʔd	tɕh		
b	d			
m	n	ɲ	ŋ	h
f	s		x	
v	z			
w	l	j/z		

Laha initials are exemplified in the following forms:

p	pɔɔm <sup>24</sup>	'mountain'	pa <sup>24</sup>	'rice husk'
	pa <sup>343</sup>	'four'	pat <sup>24</sup>	'blood'
t	ta <sup>24</sup> wan <sup>33</sup>	'sun'	tam <sup>212</sup>	'short'
	tap <sup>32</sup>	'liver'	tau <sup>212</sup>	'turtle'
tɕ	tɕam <sup>31</sup>	'one'	tɕɛ <sup>33</sup>	'tea'
	tɕwɔn <sup>343</sup>	'buy'		
k	kaan <sup>31</sup>	'chin'	kai <sup>31</sup>	'feces'
	kai <sup>343</sup>	'chicken'	kam <sup>343</sup>	'bitter'
ʔ	ʔɔ <sup>24</sup>	'insipid'	ʔɔk <sup>33</sup> laak <sup>34</sup>	'give birth'
th	thak <sup>32</sup>	'bone'	tham <sup>212</sup>	'cave'
	tho <sup>343</sup>	'seven'	thuɲ <sup>343</sup>	'leaf'
tɕh	tɕhuk <sup>33</sup> ma <sup>33</sup>	'wash hands'		
ʔb	ʔbɔɔk <sup>23</sup>	'flower'	ʔbi <sup>24</sup>	'cold'
	ʔbur <sup>212</sup> ti <sup>31</sup>	'right side'		
ʔd	ʔdɔn <sup>212</sup>	'white'	ʔdiŋ <sup>31</sup>	'black'
	ʔdun <sup>343</sup>	'stone'		
b	ba <sup>343</sup>	'dog'	bam <sup>33</sup>	'chop'
	bɔk <sup>32</sup> ta <sup>24</sup>	'skin animal'		
d	dam <sup>343</sup>	'six'	dap <sup>32</sup> ta <sup>24</sup>	'close eyes'
	dun <sup>24</sup>	'see'		
m	ma <sup>21</sup>	'cooked rice'	mat <sup>32</sup>	'ant'
	ma <sup>33</sup> hu <sup>33</sup>	'eight'	mai <sup>21</sup>	'woman'
n	na <sup>212</sup>	'bow'	na <sup>33</sup>	'field, wet'
ɲ	ɲaai <sup>343</sup>	'sand'	ɲɔ <sup>33</sup>	'salt'

<sup>2</sup>Mr. Phòm invariably pronounced /t/ as [q] in syllable-initial position, even though he also produced [th-] for /th-/. In fact, this substitution was true even in his Vietnamese, a fact of which he was quite aware. When he saw our perplexed looks, he reassured us, writing <t-> on paper, "it is a [qe]". We cannot be sure if this substitution represented a linguistic change, an idiosyncratic development in his speech, or a speech impediment. In this paper we have transcribed his [q-] as /t-/, because he obviously intended this sound, as he indicated to us, and because the /t-/ was, from comparative evidence, the expected reflex in Laha.