STYLE, SCOPE, AND RIGOR IN COMPARATIVE
TAI RESEARCH

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Praise your teachers to their face,
your friends behind their back,
your wife and children never.

-- Thai proverb

It is said that imitation is the highest form of flattery. If this is the
case, then, when it comes to methodology and theoretical outlook in
comparative Tai research, the work of William Gedney can be rated
in terms of the healthy number of followers, American as well as
Thai, it has attracted in the last decade or so. The man and his work,
the teacher and researcher—writer, are the source of that attraction
and lingering influence. In the end, however, it is the work of the
individual scholar that must stand or fall on its own merits, judged in
the light of future findings and theoretical reorientations.

What is it in the work of Gedney that has stimulated an increasing
amount of comparative Tai research and publication? Witness, for
one, the two festschrift on Tai linguistics edited by Gething (1975)
and Harris and Chamberlain (1975). At the very least, a compelling
force is that Gedney has eased the way for a new generation of
comparatists by providing us with the precise methodology and
straightforward model he has refined and outlined over the course
of his years of fieldwork, publication, and teaching. Along with F. K.
Li, he also has enlarged the scope of comparative—historical Tai
studies, going, for example, beyond the bounds set by J. Marvin
Brown in his research on “ancient Thai.” On the other hand, he has
studiously avoided extending the scope of his interest in historical
Tai to speculation on wider affiliation of Tai to other language
families such as Chinese or Indonesian. As he has commented
publicly, “It is too soon to tell.” To a scholar of his temperament and
scientific outlook, a hypothesis without solid evidence to back it up
is easily made but of questionable validity. The pursuit and publication of solid data researched by himself in the field and double-checked with follow-up fieldwork has been his professional passion. With the attention he has paid to accuracy in his own and others' data he has introduced a scientific rigor often lacking in the work of his predecessors and even some of his peers. Added to this is a writing style that is a model of disarming simplicity and clarity, a style he refers to as "like writing to the folks back home."

My own introduction to comparative-historical Tai was as a graduate student in Professor Gedney's class on the subject. I recall most vividly that his course did not begin with the usual assigned reading list or lengthy lectures. Instead things got underway with the distribution of a hefty packet of sheets containing over one thousand lexical items from a generous scattering of Tai dialects from the Northern, Central, and Southwestern branches of the Tai language family, roughly covering southern China, northern Vietnam, northern Burma, and most of Laos and Thailand. We were given practical advice on how to cut, paste, and arrange citations on 3x5 slips of paper using nothing other than "Elmer's Glue." Many hours went into mechanical cutting, pasting, and sorting at home, while in class we proceeded to discuss, item by item, the similarities and differences—as well as the many "exceptions"—in correspondences from one dialect area to another. The end product was, in part, a fat shoebox solid with carefully organized data. A typical slip would look like figure 1.

The comparative word lists supplied to us by Professor Gedney represented the fruits of several field trips to Asia, with months of intense work recording and transcribing the elicitations of native informants of Tai dialects either previously unrecorded or badly recorded in the scant literature on Tai languages. Many of these remote places in Vietnam and Laos have since been cut off by the events of 1975 in Southeast Asia. How demanding that fieldwork was none of us actually knew until we went off to repeat the experience ourselves, in the humidity, swarms of mosquitoes, and other discomforts known best to field anthropologists and linguists, in such places as Mae Sai in northern Thailand or Pakse in southern Laos.

Along with the data provided for his inductive approach to the history and science of Tai dialects, we inherited what I like to call the "Gedney Mandla." A mandla, as Indic specialists know, is the Hindu
Style, Scope, and Rigor

FIGURE 1

34 'to point' Si chii⁴ WT, BT ci⁶
Sh si⁵ 'to show, point out with the finger'
LNK sii5. LMY cii6 [LNK = Lao Nong Khai;
LMY = Lue Moeng Yong]
[Si = Siamese; WT, BT = White & Black Tai]

square elaborated for use in organizing the universe, for meditating,
and in general for bringing order out of chaos. And like the Indian
mandala, the Gedney matrix for laying out the development of
modern Tai tones and syllable-initial consonants has the virtue of
being easily used by almost anyone interested in tracing the process
of phonological changes from Tai past to present. This model of the
historical development of Tai phonology is laid out in clearest detail
in Gedney 1973 and 1979. Figure 2 is a modified form published in
Hartmann (1980).

Each Tai comparativist has his or her own version of the matrix
showing the relationship between Proto-Tai tones and initials, but
the Gedney model is the most logical, best organized, and most
clearly labeled. His is a simple ordering of the Proto-tones A, B, C,
D-short vowel nucleus, and D-long vowel nucleus, from left to right
in the vertical columns. A further separation is made into two types
of syllables: smooth and checked. To the extreme left he lists the
Proto-Tai initials which mark off three, four, or five rows, depending
on the fineness of detail involved in setting up relationships between
tones and initials and the data involved.
### FIGURE 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>*INITIALS</th>
<th>PROTO-TAI TONES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>*VL</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspirated voiceless stops</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*ph-*th-*kh-*ch-*h-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voiceless continuants</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*s-*f-*hm-*hn-<em>h-ŋ</em>ŋñ-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*hw-*xr-<em>hl-</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unaspirated voiceless stops</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*p-*t-*k-<em>c-</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glottalized consonants</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*ʔb-*ʔd-*ʔy-*ʔ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*VD</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voiced consonants</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*b-*d-*g-<em>j</em>m-<em>ŋ-</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*ŋñ-<em>z</em>-v-*y-<em>r-</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*l-*w-*y-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Key:**

| Proto-Tai tones on smooth syllables, i.e., those ending in a vowel, nasal, or glide. |
| D-s = short vowel, dead-long vowel. A dead or checked syllable ends in a stop: -p -t -k -ʔ |
| High, Mid, Low = classes of modern Siamese initial consonants as defined in the writing system. |
| *VL *VD = voiceless/voiced initials at the time of bifurcation. |