TRAVELS OF A TREE: SOUTHWEST TAI BORROWING OF
A BIOTERM -- FROM CHAM TO SHAN

John Hartmann
Northern Illinois University

In a previous paper (Hartmann 1996a), the author demonstrated, mostly through Central Thai (Siamese) classical literature, how heavily the Thai (including the Northeastern Thai and the Lao) have borrowed a large part of their lexicon for naming bioforms from Khmer. In a subsequent study of a Tai Dam foundation myth, it was discovered that the name of the narrative's hero was that of the stately tree whose Latin name is *dipterocarpus tuberculatus.* The same tree name appears in the foundation myth of the Shan, or Tai-Yai, of Saen Wii, Burma, where it is also associated with their founding hero. Likewise, a myth associated with the foundation of Vientiane, Laos, has a hero of the same name.

Complicating matters, however, is the occurrence of several varieties of *dipterocarpus* and variations in local Southwestern Tai names as well. Differences may be explained on both biological and linguistic grounds. One of the names, *k* [proto-Tai tone A1], found in Northeastern Thai (Isan), Lao of Vientiane and Luang Prabang, can be traced back to Khmer and, even one step further removed, to Cham. The genesis of other names, which seem to have two or three underlying forms, is more problematic.

In this paper, the author will present a dialect map of the *dipterocarpus* in the Southwestern Tai domain tracing the path of borrowing — the "travels of a tree" — from Cham into Khmer, Lao, and Northeastern Thai and the geographic distribution of other terms for *dipterocarpus.* In addition, there will be a discussion of the symbolic power of the bioform in cultural and literary terms and a transliteration and translation of portions of the Shan version of the legend of the tree prince, Khun Teung, to illustrate how comparative linguistics and literature can reinforce each other.

Introduction

For the past several years, I have been putting together the pieces of a project that deals with two different versions of an underlying *Ur-text* of a type of founding hero, who is called "Prince Terng" [พระเจ้า] by the Tai Dam (Black Tai) of Northwest Vietnam and "Prince Theung" [พระเจ้า] in Laos and Northeast Thailand. The slight dialect difference in the names
reflects both close similarities and dramatic differences in language (including writing systems), religion (Buddhism vs. animism), and other aspects of their cultures. A third version of the tale of the heroic prince — in Shan called Khun Teung Kham  [khun teung khim] "Prince Golden Dipterocarpus"— that was the most recent to turn up is found among the Shan of Saen Wii, Burma. Banchop (1975) summarizes the story in the passage below. A segment of the story as it is told in the original Shan of Saen Wii appears directly following the summary.

Shan Legends

When we come to that part that deals with this type of history [i.e., legends], if we would pass over them without any interest in them, we would miss several really interesting stories. So I asked permission of the Jao Fa [local ruling prince] to copy down Shan legends that his officials had just collected and written down in notebooks that I would then study with elder teachers. The language used is difficult because, besides its being a literary language, it is also in an old dialect that has many words that even the teachers themselves could not explain the exact meaning of. Still one obtains stories that are fun to read.

Of those that are amusing, it is, I would say, because - no matter which legends of which group - they usually begin with supernatural powers of the Shan, such as the previously mentioned Khun Lu, Khun Lai climbing down stairs from heaven to rule the kingdoms of humans, for example. And when they reach the earth, they usually cannot escape tales of a human male cohabiting with a female serpent. The Shan legend that I have taken to study is said to be indigenous with Saen Wii. It is of the same type that begins with "Yaam Nan," that is, "At that time," in the Kingdom of the Tai-Mau in the district of Ban Jetong [bān čē tɔɔŋ], there was an old man and woman who had a big banana grove that was next to a pond that bordered the River Mau. The name of the place was Saen Wii because the bananas of the old man and woman came forth by the thousands. The old couple had a son whose name was Khun [Prince] Aay. Khun Aay had a special quality, namely the ability to sing well and in a "cooling" style. Whenever he was free from work, he would usually sit and sing at the edge of the pond. It so
happened that a Naga princess named Baphawati heard him, and this made her fall in love with Khun Aay. So she transformed herself into a beautiful, young woman. They made love, and then the Naga princess led him down into her world and there fixed up a golden palace for him in Nagaland. Her father and the entire retinue of nagas transformed themselves into human shapes so as not to frighten Khun Aay. But he eventually knew what was going on, and so he devised the strategy of going home to visit his parents. The naga princess was forced to let him go. But she requested that Khun Aay raise the child that she would give birth to as an egg at the edge of the pond near the house of Khun Aay. He kept his word. (When he found the egg), he used his finger to poke a hole in the egg. He put his finger in the mouth of the infant to suck on. Milk then flowed out from the finger miraculously. And because the infant was born at the edge of a pond whose waters were "still," he was called "Teung" [เต่ง]. Or it might be because the old couple found the egg at the waters' edge they feared was dangerous, and so they took a leaf of the teung tree [ต้อง ตูน] and enclosed him in it. Khun Aay therefore named him "Khun Teung Kham" [Prince Golden Dipterocarpus] began a line of descendants from a naga princess.

A Shan—Saen Wi Version of Tale of Prince Teung: Thai Transliteration and English Translation

(กอดะมะ)

รายหลังเจ้าโคตายะ ผาเป่นเจ้า
time later  lord Kotama the lord

Later, the Lord Kotama

เข้า/เมืองโฉ้ เมืองหมากร
enter country

Entered the world

บริณปาน (นิภาน) จันโอมุ (จันต่อหมู่ที่/ศาสนา)
Nirvana Nirvana / religion of Nirvana.

ปีเมืองนับได้ 1274 ปีขึ้นราช
count year can 1274 year B.E.

It was the year 1274 B.E.

ยี่สิบสองปี (เกลี้ยบปลายสอง)
92 year

Ninety-two years later.
that time? country mau name village
there was in the Kingdom of the Tai-Mau a village named
Jetong. In the village of Jetong,
still have grandparents husband wife live follow/around that
Thus made orchard banana big
They tended a big banana grove
locate follow/along under/down pond that
down by a pond.
guard take care of orchard banana two CLF/persons post-verb
The two of them had been taking good care of the banana
grove.
follow that thus have child two CLF/person (they both)
The two of them eventually had a son who
know how to make make song voice/sound
cool/happy/peaceful
knew how to sing soothing songs.
day some (some days) he might get to go make
Some days he might go to make
song follow below/down river mau that every day
music down by the River Mau, sometimes every day.
Every day day 1 side/direction lady naga name
One day, a naga princess named