

# The Hypothesis of a New Branch for the Tai Languages

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## INTRODUCTION

It is generally accepted that the Tai family of languages is divided into three branches: Northern, Central and Southwestern.<sup>1</sup> This subgroup scheme was formulated by Professor Li Fang-Kuei (Li 1959, 1960, 1977) on the basis of both phonological and lexical criteria. While Li's phonological criteria remain the yardstick for comparative Tai, opinions split as to the utility of lexical classification.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to note that before his reconstruction of Proto Tai phonological system (Li 1977), Li had relied almost entirely on lexical classification (1959, 1960). He still laid great emphasis on this model in his later works (1977, 1988), maintaining that certain lexical distribution patterns are particularly pertinent to Tai subgrouping. It is significant to see that the tripartite scheme was arrived at by two different methods.

In this paper, I wish to propose a new branch of Tai along the lines of Li. My assumption is based on Dehong, a Chinese Shan dialect spoken in Yunnan, southwestern China. This dialect is located in the top northwestern part of the Tai speaking area, separated from Northern Tai by Tai Lue of Sipsongpanna and some other Southwestern dialects along the Lancang (upper reaches of the Mekong) River. The dialect studied here is spoken at Mangshi, capital of Lusi County and Dehong Dai Autonomous Prefecture. While Dehong displays certain characteristics of Southwestern Tai, it also possesses a number of Northern and Central features that are generally lacking in the Southwestern Branch, which make this dialect unique among the Tai languages.

## SOME PHONOLOGICAL AND LEXICAL SUBGROUP FEATURES FOR TAI

Before taking up my discussion of Dehong, it will be useful to have a look at certain phonological subgroup features as spelt out in Li (1977, here after HCT).

The following are among the most distinctive branch features, all of which are believed to go back to proto initial clusters involving the liquid *-r-*:

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<sup>1</sup> For other theories of Tai classification, see Haudricourt (1974) and Gedney (1989).

<sup>2</sup> For example, Gedney (personal communication.) believes that "only phonology, and phonology alone, can be used for classifying the Tai dialects."

PT	SW	CT	NT
* <i>vr</i>	<i>phr, ph</i>	<i>pj</i>	<i>š</i>
* <i>thr</i>	<i>h</i>	<i>h, th</i>	<i>r</i>
* <i>xr</i>	<i>h</i>	<i>h, l, s</i>	<i>r</i>

Of these, the representations of \**xr* is especially pertinent to our discussion, as will be seen. Also relevant are two basic vowels (parentheses = less frequent reflexes):

PT	SW	CT	NT
* <i>ɔ</i>	<i>ɔ</i>	<u><i>o</i></u>	<u><i>o</i></u>
* <i>o</i>	<u><i>o (u)</i></u>	<u><i>o (u)</i></u>	<i>ɔ</i>

There are some variations among the Central dialects, some of which show Northern features, such as Nung Fan Slihng. The reconstructed forms are obviously based on the SW languages.

In addition, the Northern dialects (except the Bouyei dialect of Shuicheng and the displaced Saek) are set off from non-Northern dialects by their lack of aspirated sounds that are believed to have come from the original aspirated sounds.

PT	SW	CT	NT
* <i>kh</i>	<i>kh</i>	<i>kh</i>	<i>k</i>
* <i>ph</i>	<i>ph</i>	<i>ph</i>	<i>p</i>
* <i>th</i>	<i>th</i>	<i>th</i>	<i>t</i>

Furthermore, lexical items like the following are often used as diagnostic features for Tai subgrouping (Li, 1959, p. 18).

Gloss	Thai	Lao	Lungchow	Tay	Wuming	Po-ai
to count	<i>nap D2</i>	<i>nap D2</i>	—	—	—	—
cold	<i>naau A1</i>	<i>naau A1</i>	—	—	—	—
cloudy	—	—	<i>kham A1</i>	<i>kham A1</i>	—	—
<i>mother's brother</i>	—	—	<i>khu C1</i>	<i>khu C1</i>	—	—
tiger	—	—	—	—	<i>kuk D1</i>	<i>kuk D1</i>
lazy	—	—	—	—	<i>klik D1</i>	<i>čik D1</i>

Such words are restricted to Northern, Central, or Southwestern area(s) only. Their distribution patterns may well represent an isoglossal line for Tai dialects.

In my study of the Tai languages, a number of formerly restricted dialect words are found to be pan-Tai cognates for which Dehong provides the missing link (Luo, 1997a, b). New data also show that a significant number of Northern words are represented in Dehong. Some of these words show traces of migration movements of early Tai speakers. Below I turn my attention to these points.

## DEHONG: SOME PHONOLOGICAL AND LEXICAL FEATURES

One of the most interesting things about Dehong is its possession of some non-Southwestern phonological features. Among them the most striking is the alternation between the velar fricative /x/ and the dental fricative /s/ for words of the following type:

Gloss		Dehong	
cast net	<i>xe</i> <sup>1</sup>	~	<i>se</i> <sup>1</sup>
excrement	<i>xi</i> <sup>4</sup>	~	<i>si</i> <sup>4</sup>
arm	<i>xɛn</i> <sup>1</sup>	~	<i>sɛn</i> <sup>1</sup>
burnt, scorched	<i>xɛm</i> <sup>4</sup>	~	<i>sɛm</i> <sup>4</sup>
chopping board	<i>xɛŋ</i> <sup>1</sup>	~	<i>sɛŋ</i> <sup>1</sup>
guest	<i>xɛk</i> <sup>3</sup>	~	<i>sɛk</i> <sup>3</sup>

Particularly worth noting are items like ‘cast net,’ ‘burnt, scorched,’ which go back to Proto Tai *\*xr-* (see the preceding section). These are rendered with /s/ or /š/ in some Central and Northern dialects (Li, 1977, p. 233; Chinese Academy of Sciences, 1959). No other Southwestern dialects are found to have this feature. Reflexes of this kind are reconstructed by Haudricourt with proto sibilant clusters *\*sr-* and *\*tsr-* (Haudricourt, 1974, pp. 467, 488). Data from Western Nung (Gedney, 1995) show remarkable similarities to Dehong’s representation of [s] for items like ‘guest,’ ‘arm,’ and ‘excrement’; cf. Sin Fong Yiw *chen*<sup>1</sup> ‘arm,’ *chɛk*<sup>2</sup> ‘guest,’ *chii*<sup>3</sup> ‘excrement,’ *ching*<sup>1</sup> ‘chopping board.’ These latter words are reconstructed with *\*x* by Li in view of data from other dialects. Reflexes in Dehong and Western Nung indicate that they go back to proto *\*xr*.

More cognates under Li’s reconstructed *\*x* are found to show /x/ ~ /s/ alternations in Dehong.

Gloss	Dehong	
green	<i>xɛu</i> <sup>1</sup>	~ <i>seu</i> <sup>1</sup>
tooth	<i>xɛu</i> <sup>4</sup>	~ <i>seu</i> <sup>4</sup>
bad smell, putrid	<i>xɛu</i> <sup>2</sup>	~ <i>sɛu</i> <sup>2</sup>

Li notes that these examples take the triphthong [iau] in Thai, represented as *khiau* (A1), *khiau* (C1) and *khiau* (A1) respectively (1977, pp. 208–212). He also notes that these items take velar clusters in Ahom, which he finds “spurious.” Incidentally, ‘tooth’ is represented with [l] in some Northern dialects, such as Fengshan *leu*<sup>3</sup> (C1). My data suggest that the examples in Dehong are not instances of synchronic free variations but remnants of a diachronic process.

A similar case is the word for ‘frog,’ cf. Dehong *xet*<sup>3</sup> ~ *set*<sup>3</sup> (D1), which also takes the final /-iat/ in Thai, *khia*t, with alternating /kh/ or /x/ in White Tai and the labio-velar /khu- (khw-)/ in Tay and Tho (Li, 1977, pp. 194, 198). Li is uncertain about the origin of this proto-initial, tentatively grouping it under *\*kh-*. We may treat this as a case of velar cluster, in view of the available data.

Less systematic but by no means unimportant are cases where Dehong sides with the Northern languages in showing unaspirated initials for items that are generally represented with aspirated initials in non-Northern languages.

Gloss	PT initial	Tone	Thai	Lungchow	Po-ai	Dehong
board	* <i>ph</i>	<i>B1</i>	<i>phœn</i>	<i>phœn</i>	<i>peen</i>	<i>pœn C1</i>
clf. for people	* <i>ph</i>	<i>C1</i>	<i>phuu</i>	<i>puu</i>	<i>puu</i>	<i>pu<sup>1</sup> A1</i>
hold, carry	* <i>th</i>	<i>A1/2</i>	<i>thii A1</i>	<i>thii A1</i>	<i>tii A2</i>	<i>tii A2</i>
add on	* <i>th</i>	<i>A1</i>	<i>thɛɛm</i>	—	<i>tɛm</i>	<i>tɛm</i>
overcast	* <i>kh</i>	<i>B1</i>	—	<i>kham</i>	—	<i>kaam C1</i>
hit, crack	* <i>kh</i>	<i>D1</i>	<i>kheck</i>	—	<i>kɛk</i>	<i>kɔk</i>

These have been reconstructed with aspirated sounds for Proto Tai (Li, 1977, pp. 64, 102, 193). Some of these examples are believed to have come from historically voiced initials in Proto-Tai (Gedney, 1989, pp. 229–270). Particularly revealing are items like ‘hold, carry,’ for which the overwhelming majority of non-Northern dialect shows an aspirated [th] with tone A1. Note that for ‘classifier for people,’ Dehong has two forms, *pu<sup>1</sup>* (A1) and *phu<sup>3</sup>* (B1), the latter a Southwestern form.

For finals, Dehong is like non-Southwestern dialects in taking /o/ and /e/ for open syllables. Consider the following:

Gloss	Tone	Thai	Lue	WT	Dehong	Nung	Po-ai	Fengshan
father	<i>B2</i>	<i>pɔɔ</i>	<i>pɔ</i>	<i>pɔ</i>	<u><i>po</i></u>	<u><i>po</i></u>	<u><i>po</i></u>	<u><i>po</i></u>
neck, throat	<i>A2</i>	<i>khɔɔ</i>	<i>xɔ</i>	<i>xɔ</i>	<u><i>ho</i></u>	<u><i>xo</i></u>	<u><i>ho</i></u>	<u><i>ho</i></u>
mother	<i>B2</i>	<i>mɛɛ</i>	<i>mɛ</i>	<i>mɛ</i>	<u><i>me</i></u>	<u><i>me</i></u>	<u><i>me</i></u>	<u><i>me</i></u>
old	<i>B1</i>	<i>kɛɛ</i>	<i>kɛ</i>	<i>kɛ</i>	<u><i>ke</i></u>	<u><i>ke</i></u>	<u><i>tɛɛ</i></u>	<u><i>tɛɛ</i></u>

The majority of the Southwestern dialects take the low back /ɔ/ and the mid front /ɛ/ for words of this kind, for which Li has proposed \*ɔ and \*ɛ respectively (Li, 1977, pp. 273, 277). Data from Dehong and the Northern languages have led us to the postulation of \*o and \*e (Luo, 1997b, pp. 56–63), merging with Li’s \*o and \*e, thus leading to a basic seven-vowel system instead of Li’s nine-vowel system for Proto-Tai.

Perhaps the most spectacular aspect of Dehong is the presence of a significant number of words that are labeled as “not found in the Southwestern dialects” in HCT, as shown in the table below. These items are generally not found in other Southwestern dialects in our data, except in Tai Lue of Sipsongpanna, where some of the above forms such as *liŋ* (B1) ‘to be steep’ and *tsoŋ* (C1) ‘umbrella’ occur.<sup>3</sup> Thus Dehong may very well be said to supply a “missing link” for pan-Tai status for a number of lexical items that were formerly found to be otherwise restricted to non-Southwestern dialects.

<sup>3</sup>Incidentally ‘steep’ is also found in Siamese in compounds like *taliŋ* [B1] ‘steep bank,’ and *tsoŋ* (C1) ‘umbrella’ is also common in Shan varieties such as Phake and Aiton.