

CULTURAL ASPECTS OF PROTO-TAI LANGUAGE

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Yunnan is the most important birthplace of mankind. Remains of the primitive man ramapithecus were found at Dai Yuan in 1950, and since then, many fossil men have been discovered. Professor Chen Lü Fan, Director of the Southeast Asia Research Institute of Yunnan, gave this chronological summary:

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| Ramapithecus Dai Yuan | 14,000,000 years BP |
| Ramapithecus Lu Feng | 8,000,000 years BP |
| Ramapithecus Hudie | 4,000,000-3,000,000 years BP |
| Eastern man | 2,500,000 years BP |
| Yuan Mo man | 1,700,000 years BP |
| Si Kao man | 100,000 years BP |
| Li Jiang man | 30,000-20,000 years BP |
| (Chen Lü Fan 1996) | |

This evidence lends support to the hypothesis that the human race originated in Asia and has led paleoanthropologists to search for the birthplace of the human race on the Suan Kwang Phong Plateau of Yunnan.

1. The Birthplace of the Tai

The Yunnan Multidisciplinary Archeological Research Team, which commenced operations at Yuan Mo in March 1987, excavated 41 teeth of Eastern man (2,500,000 years BP), 119 teeth of Ramapithecus Hudie (3,000,000-4,000,000 years BP) and remains of a hundred types of animals, including a long-armed ape, a three-toed horse, a large-lipped rhinoceros, and interestingly, the jaw of a panda-like animal, as reported in the newspaper Yunnan Ri Pao of March 23, 1987, and April 12, 1987, and in a Chin Hua news report on June 29, 1987 (Chen Lü Fan 1996).

The remains of Eastern man found at Yuan Mo, which are 2,500,000 years old, are the oldest human remains so far discovered on earth. The name signifies that Eastern man is the ancestor of the peoples of the East, including the Tai. Also found at Yuan Mo were 1,700,000-year old remains of Yuan Mo man and a great number of Paleolithic implements between 600,000 and 30,000 years old. In addition, sites representing a variety of Neolithic cultures have been discovered in Yunnan. This indicates that human beings have dwelt in what is now Yunnan no less than 2,500,000 years. At present, Yunnan is inhabited by a wide variety of peoples.

2. Tai cultural vocabulary in languages of the Austro-Thai family

Paul K. Benedict (1975) proposed the Austro-Thai family of languages, composed of Tai, Kadai, and Indonesian. He believed that Chinese was not genetically related because of syntactic differences and that common vocabulary was due to borrowing.

Ancient vocabulary of the Tai, Kadai, Indonesian family reflecting Tai culture includes:

Nature: wan "sun" deuan "moon" dao "star" nam "water"
fai "fire" fon "rain" din "earth" theuan "forest, wild"

Plants: kla "rice seedling" lang "areca" phlu "betel"
pli "banana blossom" tawng "large leaf"
nga "sesame" bai "rice"

Animals: khwai "buffalo" ngua "cow" chang "elephant"
yang pha "goat antelope" pet "duck" kai "chicken"
nok "bird" khai "egg" thaw "rabbit" luang "dragon"
pheung "bee" taw "wasp" taen "hornet"

Metals: lek "iron" thawng daeng "copper" chin "tin"

Weaving: khawt "knot" khram "indigo" khem "needle"
hawm "plant used in dying" thaw "weave (cloth)"
san "weave (baskets)" wai "rattan" yep "sew"
tam "weave (on a loom)" thai "purse" huk "loom"
ki "loom" song "envelope" klawng "box"

Vehicle: reua "boat" sa-phao "a kind of boat" jaeo "oar"
sampan "a kind of boat"

Agriculture: wan "sow broadcast" na "wet rice field"

suan "garden" khrok "monar" thai "plow"

Shelters: kra-dai "ladder" reuan "house" pra-tu "door"

ok kai "ridgepole"

Tools: khwan "ax" ba "shoulder (of ax)"

Food Preparation: tak "dip out" khem "salty"

yang "to roast" lam "to cook in a bamboo stem"

hung "to steam (rice)" dawng "to pickle" ang "basin"

kra-buai "dipper" dong "to dry cooked rice by placing
the pot over a fire after pouring off the water"

tau "fireplace"

Musical Instruments: klawng "drum" kraw "percussion sticks"

Among ancient cognates in the languages of the Austro-Thai family are those referring to landscape and weather. These words indicate that at the time the Tai lived together with the Austronesians about 6,000 years ago, they inhabited river valleys with plentiful rains wherein there were fields for planting rice, both transplanted and broadcast, and land for gardening. The tropical plants they grew were rice, banana, sesame, betel, and areca. They knew animals such as gorals, cows, buffaloes, ducks, and chickens, insects such as bees, wasps, and hornets, and minerals such as iron, copper, lead, and tin.

Ancient words indicating material culture include names of agricultural implements: axes, shouldered axes, axes for clearing forests, and ploughs yoked to buffaloes for ploughing fields; and names of utensils: water basin, coconut-shell ladle, and mortar for pounding food. The people cooked rice, roasted meat, measured amounts of grain, and used stoves in cooking.

Dwelling were elevated off the ground so that underneath there was an open and high space. The house was reached by climbing a ladder and entered through a door.

They knew how to weave, dye, and sew. They carded cotton with a bow-like implement and wove on a loom. They devised a small bag for holding things which could be tied to the waist with a rope.

These people built boats for travel on rivers, and these were propelled with paddles. They also sailed junks on the

sea, and there are some words referring to the framework of boats such as kong. They also used drums and sticks (kraw).

3. Cultural vocabulary in the Sino-Thai Family

Early linguists such as Henri Maspero (1920) and Kurt Wulff (1934) (Cited in Valaya Changkhwanyuen 1983) believed that Tai and Chinese were genetically related, and this view was also put forward by Fang-kuei Li in his 1977 reconstruction of ancient Chinese.

The Thai scholar Phraya Anuman Rajadhon found many Thai words corresponded to words in Cantonese, the variety of Chinese which preserves more ancient phonological features than any other variety, and suggested that Tai and Chinese may have both arisen from a common parent language and that the Cantonese and the Tai peoples may have common ancestry.

Sawnklin Phisetsakonkit (1946) compared Tai and Cantonese words in her Chulalongkorn University master's degree thesis "How useful are Chinese and Thai dialects in investigating the etymology of Thai words?" and proposed that Tai and Chinese belonged to the same language family.

Praphin Manomaivibool (1975) in her University of Washington (U.S.A.) doctoral dissertation "A study of Sino-Thai lexical correspondences" compared Standard Thai words with words of Middle Chinese (ca. A.D. 600-1000) and of Old Chinese (ca. 3,100 BP) and found many correspondences between Thai and Middle Chinese. Thus, Tai and Chinese must have had an ancient relationship of no less than 3,100 years and this leads to the belief that the two have a genetic relationship. If these correspondences are borrowings, then the borrowing must have occurred in the Proto-Tai period.

Rev. Princeton S. Hsü in his "Origin of the Thai People," translated into Thai by Professor Chin Yudi (1968) and published in *Sinlapakorn*, stated, "The first Chinese dictionary 'Er Yah,' which was composed in the early period of the Chow dynasty, about 3,000 years ago" contained many Tai words, for example "Mah-Kang-Lang (praying mantis), Ching-Leet (cricket), Nawn (caterpillar) and Mah-Laang Bpwawing (malaeng paw wing)." It also contains the