TONOGENESIS AS AN INDEX OF AREAL RELATIONSHIPS IN EAST ASIA

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One of the anonymous publisher's readers of my new book, Middle Chinese, remarked: "The problem of substrata and diffusion is given little weight and internal development is taken for granted where many will see the results of outside influences, especially as regards the Altaic connection in the north and the Tai connection in the south." Since his report was otherwise quite favourable, I can hardly complain about such an expression of opinion. On the other hand, since my book is not concerned with the whole history of the Chinese language but simply with reconstructing the internal development of the phonology of the standard language over a period of several centuries, the point made by my critic, even if true, seems rather irrelevant.

Even if it could be established that some of the momentous changes that took place in northern Chinese during the first millennium and a half of the present era were induced by contact with Altaic speakers, it need not imply irregularity in the actual internal process of sound change. Old English evolved rapidly after the Norman conquest but for the most part the changes in its phonology can be described autonomously without explicit reference to other languages. A complete history of the language is another matter. The massive borrowings from French, and also Scandinavian, obviously have to be recognized. The changed social role of English no doubt also accelerated internal evolution and there may even have been specific foreign influences on the directions of sound change, though this is a much more delicate matter, on
which it is difficult to find much that can count as hard evidence.

In the Chinese case, one can admit for the sake of argument that, since groups of Altaic speakers have been politically dominant over parts of North China and even the whole of China at various times during the past two millennia, there could have been similar influences on the evolution of Chinese. Though it is a question that is relevant to a book I might have written (or somebody else, perhaps my critic, might write) rather than the book I wrote, it is an interesting question on which, I am well aware, much attention has been focused recently in certain quarters. It is even argued that the Altaic influence on northern Chinese has been pervasive since prehistoric times. I must say frankly that I am totally unconvinced.

Even in the comparatively superficial matter of lexical borrowings, the Mongols and Manchus, the two most recent groups of conquerors, have contributed hardly anything to Chinese vocabulary. Typologically Chinese, whether southern or northern, remains exceedingly different both in its phonology and its syntax from any Altaic language, as any beginning learner will soon discover. Tendentious arguments based on highly selective evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, there seems to be no basis whatever for the use of a term like "altaicization" to describe the changes that have affected northern Chinese in the last millennium, let alone the whole three or four millennia of its history as has been argued.

Northern Chinese has certainly evolved more rapidly than more southerly dialects, but this can easily be accounted for by internal factors, such as the greater ease of communications in the northern plains and the internal migrations caused by wars and natural disasters, for which there is ample historical testimony, without appealing to nebulous influences from the northern nomads beyond the frontier. At most one might argue that the
imperfect learning of Chinese by Mongol or Manchu officials accelerated the
process of internal change and perhaps deflected it in certain directions, but
one needs much more than the vague, impressionistic, arguments that have been
offered so far to make one take even such claims very seriously.

What about the other side of the thesis, the claim that southern Chinese
has been greatly influenced by a Tai substratum? This is, superficially at
least, a more persuasive idea. Typological similarities between Tai and
southern Chinese dialects like Cantonese seem obvious. Chinese and Tai
speakers have lived side by side in Guangdong and Guangxi for centuries and it
is quite likely that many who now identify themselves as Chinese are descended
from Tais or from Chinese and Tai intermarriage. Nevertheless the question
that must be asked is: what has been the main direction of influence? While
there are undoubtedly substratum influences to be found in southern Chinese,
there can be little doubt that preponderant movement has been in the other
direction. It has been the politically and culturally dominant language,
Chinese, that has influenced Tai and other languages within its orbit rather
than the other way around.

Specific traces of Tai, or more specifically Zhuang, influence on
Cantonese have been discussed by various scholars. Yuan Jiahua (1960:181)
points out a handful of colloquial Cantonese words that appear to be of Zhuang
origin. He also notes that certain Zhuang words referring to topographical
features often appear in place names in Guangdong and Guangxi. Beyond this he
suggests that the lateral fricative [ɻ] in Taishan dialect and, more
generally, the presence of numerous vocabulary items with initial m-, n- and
l- in upper register tones in Cantonese and other Yue dialects may reflect
Zhuang influence. These are specific points that one can discuss.
The lateral fricative in Taishan corresponds in a quite regular way to Middle Chinese [s], which remains a sibilant in other Yue dialects. One can therefore treat the change of [s] to [ʂ] as a purely internal sound change. At the same time it is interesting to note that a similar change from [s] to [ʂ], [tʰ] or [ʃ] has also taken place in some Northern and Central Tai dialects (Li 1977:152). We are evidently in the presence of an areal phenomenon that crosses linguistic boundaries. To attribute the Taishan change to a Tai substratum is, however, hardly an adequate explanation, since common Tai *s remains in Siamese and many other dialects, including some in the north. The etiology of the change in both Chinese and Tai remains as difficult to determine as for any other sound change.

The other phenomenon mentioned by Yuan, that of upper register nasals and laterals, is not confined to Yue dialects. Even Mandarin has stray forms that violate the regular rules of phonetic development or have no known etymology. Do we look for Tai influence here also? It may be that the phenomenon is particularly evident in Yue but even here there may be possibilities of appealing to internal development that should not be overlooked. A case in point that I have referred to elsewhere is the Cantonese word 丨呂 (upper register) "slip off", which is undoubtedly cognate to Mandarin 蓮 "shed, take off", EMC tʰwat < *tʰwat, compare Tibetan lhod-pa "loose", Burmese hlwat "free, release" (1973:117). In this case an upper register 丨- in Cantonese may reflect a dialectal survival of an Old Chinese voiceless lateral.

There are no doubt other ways in which Cantonese and other Yue dialects resemble contiguous Tai languages. To what extent such areal features reflect substratum influences as opposed to local innovations that have crossed linguistic boundaries in one direction or the other remains a matter for case by case investigation. The much more sweeping claim that southern Chinese as