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Proto-Tai Vowels Revisited: A Comparison and Critique of the Work of Sarawit and Li*

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Sarawit (1973) and Li (1977) have each proposed a reconstruction of the vowel system of Proto-Tai. Because Sarawit and Li worked independently of one another, their reconstructions differ in many ways. This paper has two purposes: (1) to show exactly which units in Li's reconstruction correspond to which units in Sarawit's, and (2) to show which parts of Li's and Sarawit's reconstructions are phonologically plausible and well documented, and which parts are either phonologically implausible or poorly documented and therefore amenable to alternative solutions.

In the course of this paper I shall sometimes pointedly criticize particular reconstructions of both Sarawit and Li. Therefore I wish to stress at the beginning that these criticisms apply only to the sort of mistakes in matters of detail which creep into any very long study no matter how well or carefully done. Both The Proto-Tai Vowel System and A Handbook of Comparative Tai are wonderful books which have taught me much and which I strongly recommend to anyone interested in Tai. In fact, it is precisely because Sarawit and Li present so much information in such a clear and well organized form that it is easy to spot the few mistakes they have made.

Many of the vowel correspondences among the Tai dialects can be neatly accounted for by positing the following rather simple vowel system for Proto-Tai:[1]

*i, *ii, *ia *ɯ, *ɯɯ, *ɯa *u, *uu, *ua

*e, *ee *a, *aa *o, *oo

In many dialects, this system undergoes little change. In Siamese[2], for example, only two major changes have taken place: (1) in certain environments, the long high vowels *ii and *uu shorten to i and u, for example Proto-Tai *ʔiimᴮ 'full (after eating)' > Siamese ʔimᵀ, (2) the long non-high vowels *ee and *oo become open ɛɛ and ɔɔ, for example Proto-Tai *geepᴰ 'narrow' > Siamese khɛɛpᵀ, whereas the short non-high vowels *e and *o become close e and o, for example Proto-Tai *cepᴰ 'to hurt' > Siamese cepᵀ.

(The additional vowels of Siamese, viz. long ee and oo, short ɛ and ɔ, and the mid unrounded back vowels ɤ and ɤɤ as in ŋɤnᴸ 'silver' and dɤɤnᴹ 'to walk' occur in loanwords and in native words which have undergone irregular or specially conditioned phonological developments.)

The above system, except for the transcription, is that of Sarawit. Li proposes a different system. He believes that Proto-Tai had no long vowels. In place of the contrast between short and long high vowels (*i, *ɯ, *u versus *ii, *ɯɯ, *uu) he proposes a contrast between a series of monoph-

*ee, *aa, *oo) he proposes a contrast between a series of close vowels, *e, *ə, *o, and a series of open vowels, *ɛ, *a, *ɔ. Thus Li has a system without vowel length but with three degrees of vowel height and two series of diphthongs (Li writes *ie, etc. in place of Sarawit's *ia, etc.):

*i, *iə, *ie	*ɨ, *ɨə, *ɨe	*u, *uə, *ue
*e	*ə	*o
*ɛ	*a	*ɔ

Unfortunately, many of the vowel correspondences among the Tai dialects do not fit in to the simple system just outlined. In order to account for these recalcitrant correspondences, both Sarawit and Li set up a large number of additional Proto-Tai vowel nuclei, many of them diphthongs or triphthongs and many of them unlike anything found in modern Tai dialects. Sometimes Li's reconstruction is strikingly different in appearance from Sarawit's; for example Li's *uɨ (= IPA [uɯ]) corresponds to Sarawit's *wya: (= IPA [wja:]). In this paper, I argue that some of these problem correspondences are probably examples of ablaut or apophony, a suggestion made by Gedney (1972), and that Li and Sarawit are probably wrong in setting up special Proto-Tai nuclei to account for these alternations, which sometimes have persisted into modern dialects, for example in the Lao pair ʔaaj^{3} 'older brother', ʔɯaj^{3} 'older sister'.

The Simple or Non-Problematical Vowel Correspondences

The non-problematical correspondences, in three representative Tai dialects, are summarized in the following tables. In accordance with Li's practice I here use Siamese to represent the Southwestern Branch of the Tai Family, Lungchow to represent the Central Branch, and Po-ai to represent the Northern Branch. The developments in dialects other than these three are described in Sarawit, and specific examples of each correspondence are given in Sarawit and Li. The locations of the three dialects and of other dialects mentioned later in this paper are shown in Figure 1.

Table A: Open syllables.

Vowel length is not contrastive in open syllables. In most modern dialects, monophthongs in open syllables are long except when the syllable is unstressed, in which case they shorten. For Proto-Tai Sarawit reconstructs long monophthongs *i:, *ɨ:, etc. and Li reconstructs short monophthongs *i, *ɨ, etc. which he says lengthen in the modern dialects.

Some dialects, here examplified by Siamese, also have a set of diphthongs, ia, ɯa, and ua, which seem to go back to Proto-Tai. In other dialects these diphthongs become monophthongs, as seen, for example, in Lungchow and Po-ai in the table below. Sarawit reconstructs these diphtongs as *ia, *ɨa, and *ua (or, sometimes, *wɨa:) and Li reconstructs them as *ie, *ɨe, and *ue.

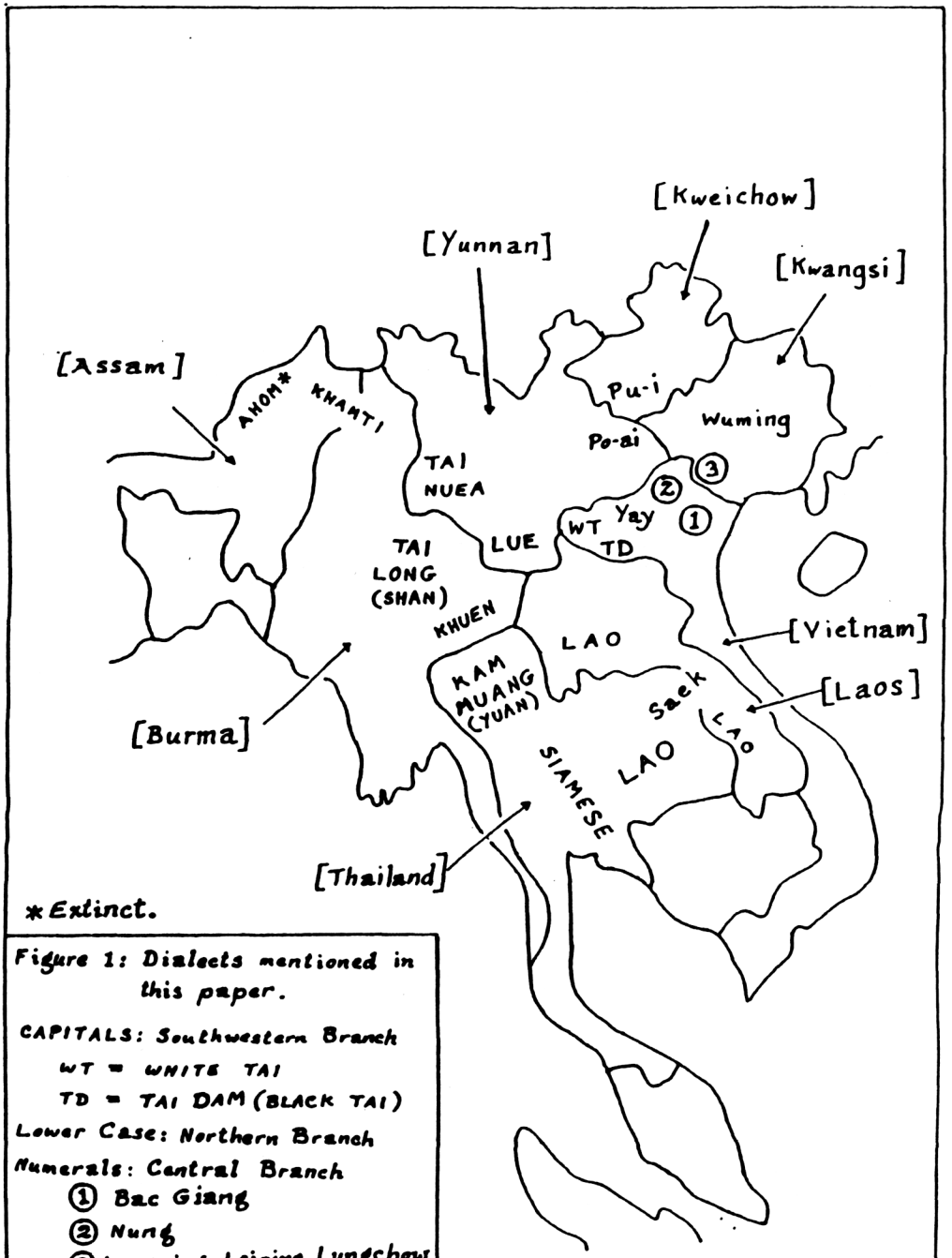

Figure 1: Dialects mentioned in this paper.

CAPITALS: Southwestern Branch
WT = WHITE TAI
TD = TAI DAM (BLACK TAI)
Lower Case: Northern Branch
Numerals: Central Branch
① Bac Giang
② Nung
③ Lungming, Leiping, Lungchow

Siamese (SW)	Lungchow (C)	Po-ai (N)	Sarawit's PT	Li's PT	Section in Li
ia	ii	ii	*ia	*ie	15.2
ɯa	ɯɯ	ɯɯ ii (after palatals)	*ɨa	*ɨe	15.3
ua	uu	uu	*ua *wɨa:	*ue	15.4
ii	ii	ii	*i:	*i	14.3.2
ɯɯ	ɯɯ	ɯɯ	*ɨ:	*ɨ	14.4.2
uu	uu	uu	*u:	*u	14.5.2
ɛɛ	ee	ee	*e:	*ɛ	14.9
aa	aa	aa	*a:	*a	14.10
ɔɔ	oo	oo	*o:	*ɔ	14.11

Notice that for the correspondence ua-uu-uu, Sarawit sometimes reconstructs *wɨa: instead of *ua. I believe that Sarawit is wrong -- Proto-Tai had only *ua -- but the argument is too complex to present here. I hope to discuss this matter in a later paper.

Table B: Vowel plus semivowel.

Li writes these nuclei as sequences of two (or three) vowels whereas Sarawit and I write them as vowel (or diphthong) plus semivowel. This is a mere notational difference.

Siamese (SW)	Lungchow (C)	Po-ai (N)	Sarawit's PT	Li's PT	Section in Li
iaw	iiw	iiw	---	*iəu (or *ieu?)	17.2
iw	iiw	iiw	*i:w	*iu	16.16
ɛɛw	eew	eew	*e:w	*ɛu	16.15
ɐw	ɐw	ɐw	*ɐw	*əu	16.10
aaw	aaw	aaw	*a:w	*au	16.14
ɯaj, ɤɤj	ɤɤj	ɯɯj	*ɨay	*ɨi	16.17
uaj	uuj	uuj	*uay	*uai	17.3
ɔɔj	ooj	ooj	*o:y	*ɔi	16.6
aj	aj	aj	*ay	*ai	16.1
aaj	aaj	aaj	*a:y	*ai	16.5
aj	aɯ	aɯ	*ay	*əɨ	16.7

In the case of the triphthongs I agree with Sarawit's reconstructions and disagree with Li's. For the correspondence iaw-iiw-iiw (which parallels the correspondence ia-ii-ii) I think Li ought to have *ieu (parallelling his *ie) not *iəu. In fact Li himself suggests *ieu as an alternative possibility. Sarawit missed this correspondence. She does have an *iaw,