CHAPTER 14

# THE SUKHOTHAI INSCRIPTION SEEN FROM THE MIDDLE MEKHONG VALLEY

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## 1. Introduction

As a non-specialist in epigraphy the writer is not directly involved in the actual debate on the Sukhothai Inscription of King Ram Khamhaeng (1292). But my attention was coincidentally attracted to the stèle while engaged in work on Lao cultural origins entitled *Contribution Ethno-historique à la Connaissance de la Culture Louang - Prabanaise.*[1] As the title indicates, the methodology of this work is ethno-historical, that is, it utilizes anthropological and historical data. In the field of history, the researcher has benefited from T. Hoshino's work (1976) which is based notably on Chinese and Vietnamese texts and chronicles and which has offered a renewed historical vision of Laos and neighboring countries.

The main purpose of this present paper is to compare the historical situation in the Middle Mekhong valley around 1292 with the contents of the Sukhothai inscription. The tentative conclusions are as follows:

1. The findings seem to be in accordance with the contents of the inscription, notably concerning the conquest made by King Ram Khamhaeng of the Middle Mekhong valley;

2. In addition, Sukhothai's influence may have reached the Tai of Tonking (North Vietnam) in that period;

3. According to the Chinese and Vietnamese sources, it seems that the aforesaid conquest was undertaken jointly by Mongolian and Sukhothai armies.

We will examine successively the regional context around 1292, the contents of the inscription, and the relevant local data.

## 2. The Regional Context Around 1292

For a little over a century (1253-1368), the history of Yunnan and mainland Southeast Asia was dominated by the Mongols. Nevertheless, from their conquest of Dali in 1253 through the foundation of the Ming dynasty in 1368, the administration of their territories was not easy and they were faced with local rebellions.

From the conquest of Dali through the foundation of Chiang Mai by King Mangrai (1296), the events in Yunnan and mainland Southeast Asia can be summarized into the following stages:

2.1 Conquest and pacification of Yunnan: having conquered in 1225 the Kingdom of Dali (the successor of the Nan Zhao Empire), the Mongols pacified all of Yunnan and from there attacked neighboring countries such as the *Kin Che* ("Golden Teeth") or Shan States who belonged to the Pagan Kingdom; probably the Sip Song Panna (Hoshino 1976: 51); and the *Dai Co Viet* (Vietnam). These conquests and pacifications continued until 1257. The displacement in 1262 of King Mangrai's capital from Hiranya Ngoen Yang (Chiang Saen) to Chiang Rai was perhaps related to the above events.

2.2 A relaxing of Mongol domination: for one decade between 1270 and 1280, because of their efforts to conquer all of China, the Mongols loosened their rule in Yunnan. In the same period it can be seen that King Mangrai expanded his power to the west and to the east, founding Chiang Khong in 1269 and Fang in 1273. In Burma, the "Golden Teeth" were reconquered by Pagan in 1277.

2.3 The conquest of mainland Southeast Asia: having conquered all of China the Mongols founded the Yuan Dynasty in 1279. Then they had the opportunity to devote themselves to mainland Southeast Asian affairs. Between 1281 and 1285, they attacked

and subjugated Dai Co Viet, Zhan Cheng (Champa), and Cambodia.

According to the *Si Yi Guang Ji,* the capital of Zhan Cheng, Da Zhou, was situated in the middle valley of the Mekhong River. We had identified this city as Dhatu Phanom (Doré: 584 - 5). But the local king's and crown prince's titles, *Bei You Bu La Zhe Wu* and *Bu Di Li (Fu) Ka,* respectively identified by Hoshino (1976: 233) as "Phraya Phao Raja" and "Phra Tulaka," suggest that the area under control of the Zhan Cheng in that period reached Central Laos.[2] This indicates that sometime after Jayavarman VII's death, dated by Coedès (1964: 329) at about 1218, Champa had replaced Cambodia in spreading its power to this part of the Middle Mekhong valley.

According to the *Yuan Shi,* Da Zhou was conquered in the period 1282 - 1284. The *Si Yi Guang Ji* specifies that the Mongolian General Sogotu led this campaign and that a new province was founded. In 1283, as in Dali since 1260, a *zhong guan* (deputy governor) was appointed to Zhan Cheng. Liu Jin was chosen. Hoshino (226) thinks that the name Liu Jin, pronounced "Lao Kham" in Cantonese, can be identified as "Ram(a) Kam-(haeng)." In this respect, it would seem that in the territories under their control, the Mongols retained the local prince in his position with the title of *mo he cuo* (from Pali *maharaj*), while at the same time integrating the latter into their administrative system as deputy governor.

In 1287, the Mongols conquered the Kingdom of Pagan, and having subdued Jinghong in 1290, they subjugated all of Sip Song Panna and the northern part of Lanna (Chiang Saen - Chiang Rai) in 1290-1296. These regions were renamed "Great Cheli" and "Little Cheli" respectively. Jinghong became the Mongol prefect's headquarters (Hoshino 58).

The foundation in 1296 of Chiang Mai, the "new city" to the south of Fang, by King Mangrai seems to be a direct consequence of the above mentioned events. The Mongols called Mangrai's kingdom Ba Bai.

2.4 The Tai rebellion: immediately after Chiang Mai's founding in 1297, King Mangrai counter-attacked, invading Cheli and Burma. This operation promoted a general rebellion in southern Yunnan against the Mongol rule. The Mongols were unable to bring the situation under control until about 1312 - 1315 (Hoshino: 61).

## 3. The Contents of the Sukhothai Inscription

According to the fourth face of the inscription, Sukhothai's tributary peoples were the "Ma, Kao, Lao, and the Thai of Muang Tai Laa-Faa (country-under-the-sky)...the Thai peoples of the (Nam) Ou River and of the (Nam) Khong River."

The Ma and the Kao were probably the inhabitants of the Mae Nam Nan River. The Lao in question were certainly those of Vieng Chan-Vieng Kham (Vientiane) and of Sua (Louang-Phrabang). In fact, these two cities are mentioned in the following passage of the inscription as dependants of Sukhothai. The Thais of the Mae Nam Ou and the Mekhong rivers are the Tai Lue of Northern Laos and Sip Song Panna. The Thai of Muang Tai Laa - Faa, which Coedès (1964: 360, n. 4) supposed to be those in China, are still questionable. Indeed, the Tai Dam chronicle, *Quam To Muang* (section 1), regards Muang Om Muang Ai, which are located in Sip Song Panna, as being "outside of the Muang Tai Laa-Faa," indicating that the Tai Dam are living in the latter. In that respect, Sukhothai's domination would have reached through Louang Phrabang to the western part of Tonking.

In order to further explore the contents of this part of the inscription, let us examine some local data of Lan Xang and Sip Song Chou Tai (Tonking).

## 4. Local Data

4.1 Anthropological data from the local chronicles: in the anthropological field, the following data have to be investigated:

1) The Mongols practiced the cult of Heaven and Earth (Hambis 1951: 260-265) mixed with Mahayana Buddhism. Hoshino (144-5) thinks that the Mongol religion has deeply influenced the Lao aristocracy in that period and may explain later conflicts with Theravada Buddhism from Sri Lanka.

In fact, according to the *Nithaan Khoun Boromarajathiraj* (BE 2510: 63), after having unified Lan Xang in 1354, King Fa Ngum established the cult of the "worship of Heaven" *(liang faa liang thaen)* as a national ritual in accordance with the order of his grandfather whose name was, and this is notable, Phii Faa or "Spirit of Heaven" (Doré: 598). It seems that in the 13th and 14th centuries, the term Phii Faa referred to Mongol Mahayana Buddhism. The term *Muang Phii Faa* assigned to Angkor in a later stone inscription of Sukhothai (Coedès I, 1924: 63-4) should be understood in this perspective.

Elsewhere, the *Quam To Muang* (section 3) mentions that Prince Lo Laet (also named Chao Ngu Hao, the "Cobra Prince), who ruled the Tai Dam people from the end of the 13th century through the first quarter of the 14th century (Doré: 591 - 2), "performed diligently the cult of Heaven and Earth together with the ancestors."

2) From Phagna Khamphong's reign (1286/7 through the first part of the 14th century)[3] the term *Ho Louang* (Great Yunnanese) appears in the Lao chronicles (Hoshino: 88).

This term is also mentioned in the *Quam To Muang* (section 3) together with other kinds of Ho: it is said that Prince Lo Laet organized his administration, appointing the titles of *Pan, Pong, Ho Louang, Ho Dao,* and *Ho He.*

In the Muang Sua Court, the *Ho Louang* was an important personage who interfered directly in political affairs. He is regarded by Hoshino (88) as a high-ranking Mongol officer, probably originating from Yunnan or the Shan States.

3) Like King Ram Khamhaeng in Sukhothai, Prince Lo Laet in the *Quam To Muang* (section 3) "invents script and teaches it to the people."

Thus, according to these sources, a real Mongol and Sukhothai influence on politics and culture can be seen in Lan Xang and the Tai Dam area (Tonking).

4.2 Historical data from local chronicles: as mentioned above, the Mongol and Sukhothai armies spent two years fighting in the Dhatu Phanom-Vientiane region. In 1284 they controlled the situation completely and founded a new province. Let us look at the situation in Muang Sua and the Tai Dam area in the same period:

1) In Muang Sua, King Phagna Lang had been ruling since 1271/2 (Hoshino: 90). According to the *Phongsavadaan Muang Lao,* Crown Prince Souvanna Khamphong took over the throne at the expense of his father and kept the latter in confinement in Xieng Phaet at the mouth of the Ou River. This event occurred in 1286/7 (Hoshino: 88 -9). Considering, on the one hand, the historical context (section 2 of this paper) and the politico - cultural influences on Muang Sua received from the outside during this period (section 4) on the other, Souvanna Khamphong's *coup d'état* would seem to have been performed in the service of Mongol and Sukhothai interests.

2) In what we suppose to be 1301 AD (Doré: 592), the *Quam To Muang* records that Prince Lo Laet, who had problems with the Kinh (Vietnamese), was allowed by *"Pha Chao Phong Kam"* (King Souvanna Khamphong) to govern En (southeast of Jinghong in Sip Song Panna). Sometime later, according to the same text, Muang Don Chao Tao (a district of Jinghong) revolted and refused to pay tax. As the two generals sent could not suppress the rebellion, the *"pha chao"* (King Souvanna Khamphong) dispatched Prince Lo Laet. The latter succeeded and returned to Muang Sua with much tribute. In the following year it was the turn for Muang Met Muang Pa (south of Jinghong) to rebel. Having been sent again, Prince Lo Laet put down the rebellion and for a second time returned with tribute.

Sometime after this campaign, the Tai Dam text says that Prince Lo Laet retired himself to Muang Mouay (Tonking) after having stayed with "Pha Chao Phong Kam in Laos for ten years."

This means that he came back in 1311/2. The above data agree with the Chinese sources, according to which in 1312 the two Cheli sent taxes as before and in 1315 the Ba Bai of King Mangrai did so as well (Hoshino: 61).

The passage mentioned above from the *Quam To Muang* has the following implications: (1) In 1301 the Sip Song Panna was already dependent upon Muang Sua; (2) The conquest of Sip Song Panna consequently took place before this date. It would be difficult to place it between 1297-1301 because of the general rebellion, prompted by King Mangrai, in southern Yunnan and Little Cheli (see section 2); (3) So it may have taken place between 1286/7 (Souvanna Khamphong's *coup d'état*) and 1297. This period includes precisely the conquest of Jinghong by the Mongols in 1290 (paragraph 2.3) two years before the Sukhothai Inscription.

## Conclusion

In this paper we have compared the situation in the Middle Mekhong Valley in about 1292 with the contents of the Sukhothai inscription attributed to King Ram Khamhaeng. We have seen that:

1) The historical period in which the stone inscription appeared was dominated by the Mongols.

2) The Mongols and Sukhothai shared common interests in the region: having conquered central Laos (1282-1284), they probably extended their power to Northern Laos and the Tai Dam area with the aid of Muang Sua's Crown Prince Souvanna Khamphong beginning in 1286/7.

3) It is thought that Prince Souvanna Khamphong is responsible for the Mongol and Sukhothai conquest of Sip Song Panna in 1290. This conquest was not performed from north to south, but from south to north, through northern Laos.

In conclusion, the findings brought out here are in agreement with the content of the Sukhothai inscription. The enu-

meration of the tributary people corresponds even in the chronology of the conquests: the Ma and the Kao, located east of Sukhothai come first. After them are cited sucessively the Lao of Central and Northern Laos, the Thai of "Muang Tai Laa-Faa" which we have identified with the Tai of Tonking, and finally the Thai peoples of the Ou and the Khong rivers who were respectively the Tai Lue of Northern Laos and of Sip Song Panna.

## Notes

1 Thèse de Doctorat d'Etat, Université Paris V (Sorbonne), 1987.

2 *Phao,* coconut tree, is probably Muang Phan Phao, the "city of a thousand coconut trees," situtated near Phonphisai in Nongkhai Province. *Tulaka* is the Pali name of Muang Tourakhom in the Nam Ngeum valley, about 60 kilometers north of Vientiane.

3 For the dating of Khamphong's reign see Hoshino (89) and Doré (594).

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