STYLE, SCOPE, AND RIGOR IN COMPARATIVE TAI RESEARCH

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Praise your teachers to their face,
your friends behind their back,
your wife and children never.

-- Thai proverb

It is said that imitation is the highest form of flattery. If this is the case, then, when it comes to methodology and theoretical outlook in comparative Tai research, the work of William Gedney can be rated in terms of the healthy number of followers, American as well as Thai, it has attracted in the last decade or so. The man and his work, the teacher and researcher–writer, are the source of that attraction and lingering influence. In the end, however, it is the work of the individual scholar that must stand or fall on its own merits, judged in the light of future findings and theoretical reorientations.

What is it in the work of Gedney that has stimulated an increasing amount of comparative Tai research and publication? Witness, for one, the two festschrift on Tai linguistics edited by Gething (1975) and Harris and Chamberlain (1975). At the very least, a compelling force is that Gedney has eased the way for a new generation of comparativists by providing us with the precise methodology and straightforward model he has refined and outlined over the course of his years of fieldwork, publication, and teaching. Along with F. K. Li, he also has enlarged the scope of comparative–historical Tai studies, going, for example, beyond the bounds set by J. Marvin Brown in his research on "ancient Thai." On the other hand, he has studiously avoided extending the scope of his interest in historical Tai to speculation on wider affiliation of Tai to other language families such as Chinese or Indonesian. As he has commented publicly, "It is too soon to tell." To a scholar of his temperament and scientific outlook, a hypothesis without solid evidence to back it up

is easily made but of questionable validity. The pursuit and publication of solid data researched by himself in the field and double-checked with follow-up fieldwork has been his professional passion. With the attention he has paid to accuracy in his own and others' data he has introduced a scientific rigor often lacking in the work of his predecessors and even some of his peers. Added to this is a writing style that is a model of disarming simplicity and clarity, a style he refers to as "like writing to the folks back home."

My own introduction to comparative-historical Tai was as a graduate student in Professor Gedney's class on the subject. I recall most vividly that his course did not begin with the usual assigned reading list or lengthy lectures. Instead things got underway with the distribution of a hefty packet of sheets containing over one thousand lexical items from a generous scattering of Tai dialects from the Northern, Central, and Southwestern branches of the Tai language family, roughly covering southern China, northern Vietnam, northern Burma, and most of Laos and Thailand. We were given practical advice on how to cut, paste, and arrange citations on 3x5 slips of paper using nothing other than "Elmer's Glue." Many hours went into mechanical cutting, pasting, and sorting at home, while in class we proceeded to discuss, item by item, the similarities and differences--as well as the many "exceptions"--in correspondences from one dialect area to another. The end product was, in part, a fat shoebox solid with carefully organized data. A typical slip would look like figure 1.

The comparative word lists supplied to us by Professor Gedney represented the fruits of several field trips to Asia, with months of intense work recording and transcribing the elicitations of native informants of Tai dialects either previously unrecorded or badly recorded in the scant literature on Tai languages. Many of these remote places in Vietnam and Laos have since been cut off by the events of 1975 in Southeast Asia. How demanding that fieldwork was none of us actually knew until we went off to repeat the experience ourselves, in the humidity, swarms of mosquitoes, and other discomforts known best to field anthropologists and linguists, in such places as Mae Sai in northern Thailand or Pakse in southern Laos.

Along with the data provided for his inductive approach to the history and science of Tai dialects, we inherited what I like to call the "Gedney Mandla." A *mandla*, as Indic specialists know, is the Hindu

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FIGURE 1

34 'to point' Si chii[4] WT, BT ci[6]

Sh si[5] 'to show, point out with the finger'

LNK sii5. LMY cii6 [LNK = Lao Nong Khai;
LMY = Lue Moeng Yong]

[Si = Siamese; WT, BT = White & Black Tai]

square elaborated for use in organizing the universe, for meditating, and in general for bringing order out of chaos. And like the Indian *mandla*, the Gedney matrix for laying out the development of modern Tai tones and syllable–initial consonants has the virtue of being easily used by almost anyone interested in tracing the process of phonological changes from Tai past to present. This model of the historical development of Tai phonology is laid out in clearest detail in Gedney 1973 and 1979. Figure 2 is a modified form published in Hartmann (1980).

Each Tai comparativist has his or her own version of the matrix showing the relationship between Proto–Tai tones and initials, but the Gedney model is the most logical, best organized, and most clearly labeled. His is a simple ordering of the Proto–tones A, B, C, D–short vowel nucleus, and D–long vowel nucleus, from left to right in the vertical columns. A further separation is made into two types of syllables: smooth and checked. To the extreme left he lists the Proto–Tai initials which mark off three, four, or five rows, depending on the fineness of detail involved in setting up relationships between tones and initials and the data involved.

FIGURE 2

*INITIALS	PROTO-TAI TONES					
*VL	A	B	C	D-s	D-1	
Aspirated voiceless stops *ph-*th-*kh-*ch-*h-						----
						High
Voiceless continuants *s-*f-*hm-*hn-*h-ŋ*hñ- *hw*-*hr-*hl-						----
Unaspirated voiceless stops *p-*t-*k-*c-						----
						Mid
Glottalized consonants *ʔb-*ʔd-*ʔy-*ʔ						
*VD						----
Voiced consonants *b-*d-*g-*-j*m-*n- *ŋ-*ñ-*z-*v-*ɤ-*r- *l-*w-*y-						Low
						----

Key: ABC   =   Proto-Tai tones on smooth syllables, i.e., those ending in a vowel, nasal, or glide.

D-s D-1   =   dead-short vowel, dead-long vowel. A dead or checked syllable ends in a stop: -p -t -k -ʔ

High, Mid, Low   =   classes of modern Siamese initial consonants as defined in the writing system.

*VL *VD   =   voiceless/voiced initials at the time of bifurcation.

By way of comparison, Brown (1965) has a similar setup. There, however, without indication via column headings (except for a brief note of explanation on page 52) he has merged Proto-tone B with D-long and Proto-tone C with D-short. His reason for doing so is not made explicit, but we do learn from Gedney (1973) that the modern tones in the B and D-long columns almost invariably have the same tonal shape. Hence the juxtaposition that Brown gives them. According to Brown's chart, reproduced in figure 3, "ancient Thai" had five tones (0 1 2 3 4) and three initial laryngeal components, which correspond to the three modern categories of high, mid, and low initials. Brown's tones 0, 1, 3 correspond to Gedney's A, B, C; tones 2 and 4 can be equated to Gedney's D-long and D-short, respectively. Modern Bangkok tonal splits in Brown's (1965:86) scheme appear as follows (reintroduction of numbered column headings is mine). Dark lines indicate patterns of tonal splits or coalescence.

FIGURE 3

Bangkok
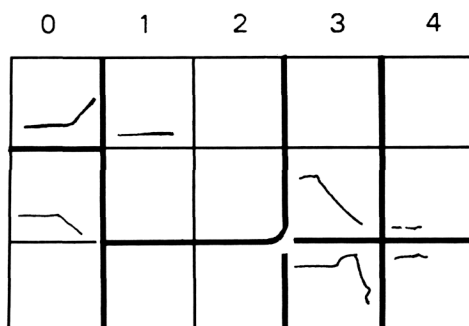
Source: J. Marvin Brown, *From Ancient Thai to Modern Dialects* (Bangkok: Social Science Association Press, 1965), 86.

In Gedney's scheme the tonal patterning for modern Bangkok would appear as in figure 4.

FIGURE 4

A	B	C	DS	DL
Tone 5	Tone 2	Tone 3	Tone 2	Tone 2
Tone 1	Tone 3	Tone 4	Tone 4	Tone 3

Gedney (1973) follows local practice for numbering tones in any one dialect. The modern Siamese (Bangkok) tones are listed by him as follows.

(1) level, slightly lower than mid, with a slight fall before pause or open transition: $khaa^1$ 'to be stuck'
(2) low level: $khaa^2$ 'a kind of root used in cooking'
(3) falling, with glottal constriction: $khaa^3$ 'to kill'
(4) high rising falling, with glottal constriction: $khaa^4$ 'to engage in trade'
(5) rising: $khaa^5$ 'leg'

F. K. Li (1977:28) uses still another method for laying out the development of modern tones, as shown in figure 5. Again, his scheme does not provide a quick comparative glance at the modern tones of any one dialect in the streamlined manner of the Gedney model.

In figure 5 the subdivisions 1 and 2 of the Proto-Tai tone categories relate to the historical two-way split between the Proto-voiceless and voiced initials, respectively. The three-way division used by Gedney and Brown for Siamese provides finer detail for the A column and a more explicit statement of factors conditioning the trifurcation in Siamese Thai and related dialects such as Lao and Southern Thai.

Gedney's layout of tonal correspondences in "boxes" or "slots" is a very handy fieldwork device. It is convenient to determine the

FIGURE 5

Proto-Tai		Siamese
A {	1	mid level 33, or rising 24
	2	mid level
B {	1	low level 33
	2	falling 41
C {	1	falling 41
	2	high 453 or 55
D {	1 S L	low level 22
	2 S L	high 55 falling 41

Source: Fang-Kuei Li, *A Handbook of Comparative Tai* (Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press, 1977), 28.

tones of any one dialect by starting with items in columns A, B, and C (the smooth syllables that will show the maximum number of *phonemic* tones). Then one proceeds to deal with the checked variety of syllable, phonetically conditioned by vowel length in some of the Southwestern Tai dialects. Details of Professor Gedney's field methods have been provided by Way (1966:12):

> ... he asks for three for each "slot" in case cognates

have been lost. Then he elicits forms for a longer wordlist, arranged semantically--number words, names of parts of the body, . . .

Another, and final, system for discussing and displaying tonal arrays is the one commonly used by Chinese linguists. I have constructed my version of it (figure 6) from information in Wulff (1934) and Yip (1980).

FIGURE 6

	LEVEL		OBLIQUE	
	P'ing (Ping)	Shang (Shang)	Ch'ü (Qu)	Ju (Ru)
(*VL) Yin	1	3	5	7
(*VD) Yang	2	4	6	8

(---------smooth---------) (checked)

The following descriptive terms for tones ('*shêng*') are also used in interpreting categories.

p'ing = level tone (used to tran-
scribe Sanskrit vowel
length)
SMOOTH SYLLABLES   shang = rising tone
ch'ü = departing tone

CHECKED SYLLABLES   ju = entering tone

If we take an even closer look at the Chinese system for labeling tones, we see certain similarities between it and Brown's scheme. Yip (1980) points out that the Ju/Ru tone category is composed of syllables with final voiceless stops. That is to say, they are checked, or, in Thai terms, D ("dead") syllables. In her analysis of Cantonese, one of the best I have seen, Ju/Ru-category tones appear as allotones of Ch'ü/Qu tones, which implies that Cantonese is a six-tone language, having undergone a simple two-way split like

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many of the neighboring Tai languages found in southern China. (Compare this to the seven tones given by Boyle 1970 or Bruce 1970 for Cantonese.)

Thus, the Ch'ü/Qu and Ju/Ru tonal categories are juxtaposed for the same apparent reason that Brown joins Thai columns *B and *D (long). If Yip had adopted the Tai comparativist tradition of D-long and D-short tonal categories, she would have drawn a separate column in place of the two rows she provides for the Yin Ju/Ru short-vowel vs. long-vowel distinction. Accordingly, her Yin Ju/Ru short-vowel syllable, with its high-level (5) tone might be viewed, in Thai terms, as an allotone of Yin Shang/Shang high rising (35). This illustrates the important point that Middle Chinese tone categories should be compared to Proto-Tai tone categories in the following order:

Middle Chinese:	P'ing/	Shang/	Ch'ü/Qu	Ju/Ru
	Ping	Shang		
Proto-Tai:	A	C	B	D

Compare this to the order given by Benedict (1972):

p'ing shêng	=	A
shang shêng	=	B
ch'ü shêng	=	C

As Gedney (1976:68) notes:

> In his new 1975 material, pp. 190–200, PKB [Benedict] deals with these three Proto-Thai tones, but students must be warned that his Proto-Thai B and C tones correspond respectively to C and B in the work of other scholars. It is ironic that in this matter, PKB, whose whole effort is aimed at disproving a Thai-Chinese relationship, is here following Sinological usage.

Manomaivibool (1976:27, n. 4) notes also, "Middle Chinese *p'ing*, *shang*, *chü*, and *ju* correspond [*sic*] to Proto-Tai tonal classes A, C, B and D respectively (Wulff 1934)."

Gedney's caveat about Benedict's confusing Middle Chinese and Proto-Tai tonal categories illustrates dramatically the likelihood of making the wrong assumptions based on a lack of explicitness in one's argument (that is, no clear indication of the different order of Middle Chinese and Tai tonal categories) and compounding the error further by the use of faulty data.

On the latter count, Gedney (1976:68-69) criticizes Benedict's "failure to mark tones" in strong terms, and justifiably so. A similar lapse is noted by the Mon-Khmer comparativist Diffloth (1977, n. 41): "Benedict also disregards all of Luce's tones." Diffloth goes on to present evidence against "the daring and novel hypothesis" put forth by Benedict concerning a purported historical relationshp between his Austro-Thai and Austroasiatic, a relationship called "substratumized Austro-Thai."

This means that if Benedict's hypotheses concerning Austro-Thai are to be more convincingly demonstrated, they will have to be reworked with greater scientific rigor, using data sufficient in quantity and, even more important, quality to answer the questions asked. Even then, we may not be totally convinced one way or the other of more than the validity of the methods used and their faithful execution.

From the Austronesian side there is as much, if not more, skepticism about Benedict's Austro-Thai theories. While not a direct criticism of Benedict's work as such, the following remark of Zorc (1979:66, n. 5) is a cogent commentary on the present state of comparative Southeast Asian linguistics.

> Comparative reconstruction has a limited power, estimated at about 10,000 years before the present. Hence, no statements can be made that all the languages of the world have come from a common parent language. Linguists deal with established language families, and Proto Austronesian is just one. Attempts, mostly unconvincing and unsuccessful, have been made to link Austronesian languages with Chinese, Thai, Japanese, Indo-European, or Australian Aboriginal languages, but clearly all languages have changed so drastically in time that only a handful of evidence for such linkage (to any ONE of the above-mentioned groups) is presented.

> Such evidence can be the product of accident, early-borrowing, or genetic inheritance, but it is so scarce that it is doubtful that we will ever know what was the language family closest to Proto Austronesian.

The preceding discussion may lead to the conclusion that Gedney has paid no attention to greater theoretical issues, that all of his scholarship has been aimed at amassing data without further reflection or hypothesizing. One of his published works, "A Puzzle in Comparative Tai Phonology" (1972), raises questions about sporadic alternations in vowel height in various languages of the Tai family. The theoretical issues posed in the article provoked an interesting response from the French comparativist Haudricourt (1975) in his paper, "A Propos du Puzzle de W. J. Gedney." Among his unpublished works of theoretical content, Gedney has written two of interest: "Future Directions in Comparative Tai Linguistics" (1967) and "A Spectrum of Phonological Features in Tai" (1970).

While theoretical issues did concern him, it must be admitted that most of Gedney's work is empirical in nature. In his teaching, research, and writing he has had a special concern for the collection and clear presentation of abundant and accurate data. His immediate impact has been strongest, as might be expected, on a number of his American graduate students in linguistics. The most significant long-range effect of his work, however, may be the impact he has had on linguistics students in Thailand. Two recent, high-quality works on comparative Tai, executed in the Gedney style and reflecting his influence on scholarship by Thais, are an article by Somchit Davies (1979) and a master's thesis by Panka (1980). Several similar studies by Thais are in the works. And this is likely the way Professor Gedney would prefer it. As he has said on at least one occasion, "Don't feel that I have done it all! There's lots more waiting to be done!"

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