

PROTO-TAI \*kh- AMD \*x-

Li Fang-Kuei

In *A handbook of comparative Tai*, published in 1977, I reconstructed two Proto-Tai (PT) consonants \*kh- and \*x-. These two consonants merge into kh- in most of the South-Western and Central Tai languages, such as Siamese and Lungchow, but they are distinguished in the Northern group of Tai languages, such as Po-ai, where PT \*kh- becomes k (unaspirated) and PT \*x- becomes h-. A few examples may be given as follows:

	<i>Siamese</i>	<i>Lungchow</i>	<i>Po-ai</i>
PT * <u>kh</u> - <sup>1</sup>			
'to kill'	khaa Cl	khaa Cl	kaa Cl
'horn'	khau Al	-	kau Al
PT * <u>x</u> -			
'to enter'	khau Cl	khau Cl	hau Cl
'to step across'	khaam Cl	khaam Cl	haam Cl



The reconstructions are obvious enough, but there is some disturbing evidence from the South-Western group of languages which makes me reconsider the whole problem, particularly the problem of aspiration in Proto-Tai.

In White Tai and some of the Lü dialects, and also, I believe, in Old Siamese, i.e. of the Sukhothai period or about that time, there is a split of both PT \*kh- and \*x-. For example:

	<i>Siamese</i>	<i>White Tai</i>	<i>Po-ai</i>
A. PT * <u>kh</u> -			
'to kill'	khaa Cl	xa Cl	kaa Cl
'arm'	khɛɛn Al	xɛn Al	čeen Al
PT * <u>x</u> -			
'white'	khaau Al	xau Al	haau Al
'to enter'	khau Cl	xǎu Cl	hau Cl

	<i>Siamese</i>	<i>White Tai</i>	<i>Po-ai</i>
B. PT <u>*kh-</u>			
'ditch, pit'	khum A1	khum A1	kum A2
'to ride on horseback'	khii B1	khi, khii B1	kiii B2
PT <u>*x-</u>			
'excrement'	khii C1	khi C1	hai C2
'rice'	khau C1	khǎu C1	hau C2
'bitter'	khom A1	khum A1	ham A2

Similarly my Lü material, as yet unpublished, from Cheng Tung in Yunnan province, shows the same split as in White Tai. It is evident that kh- or x- represent both PT \*kh- and \*x in White Tai and Lü. This is not a random split, as it has its reflexes in the Northern Tai languages. x- appears in words which show tone series 1 (indicating original voiceless initials) in all dialects, but kh- appears in words which show tone series 2 (indicating original voiced initials) in the Northern Tai languages. Now, White Tai and Lü are South-Western languages, far removed from the Northern group; the split which agrees with the tone alternation in the Northern group must indicate some early phonological condition in the Proto-Tai period. It is for this reason that I wish to amend my previous reconstruction.

Siamese orthography formerly provides two symbols for the modern consonant kh-; one corresponds to the Indic letter kh- (  ), and the other is a modified form of the Indic kh- (  ). There must have been a difference in pronunciation between these two letters, although they merge in modern Siamese. At the present time the modified form of Indic kh- is no longer used. From the Sukhothai inscriptions, some words which show the modified form of kh- -- such as khaa C1 'to kill': kheen A1 'arm'; khaau A1 'white'; khin C1 'to ascend'; khaam C1 'to step across', etc. -- all agree with x- in White Tai and Lü. This fact had already been noticed by Burnay and Coedès (1928:125). It may imply two things. First, we may simply assume in modern Siamese (Modern Standard Thai, i.e. MST), that the two distinct sounds of the Sukhothai period have merged, and, therefore, also assume that modern Siamese is a direct descendant of Sukhothai speech; or rather we may conclude that modern Siamese is not a direct descendant of the Sukhothai dialect, but a closely related dialect.

It seems that what has been reconstructed as \*kh- and \*x- must be given two different forms for each of the PT consonants, i.e. two forms for PT \*kh- and two forms for \*x. The reconstructed forms must be able to explain the split into

kh- and x- in White Tai, Lü, and Old Siamese, and also the alternation of tone, from series 1 to series 2 in the Northern dialects. It has been known that such alternation of tones occurs chiefly in words with aspirated initials, hence it is quite possible that the aspiration may be the cause of such tone alternations.<sup>2</sup>

I make the assumption that there were two kinds of aspiration in Proto-Tai, namely \*h- and \*ɸ-, an assumption based on the aspiration as reflex in the South-Western and Central dialects. \*ɸ- is perhaps a voiced aspiration or murmur. Thus, we have in Proto-Tai both \*kh- and \*kɸ-; the latter type of consonant being quite common among the Wu dialects in China.

We may now amend our reconstruction of \*kh- and \*x- and their development in the following way:

	<i>Siamese</i>	<i>White Tai</i>	<i>Lungchow</i>	<i>Po-ai</i>
PT <u>*kh-</u>	kh-	x-	kh-	k-
PT <u>*kɸ-</u>	kh-	kh-	kh-	PNT *g- > k- <sup>3</sup>
PT <u>*x-</u>	kh-	x-	kh-	h-
PT <u>*ɸ-</u>	kh-	kh-	kh-	PNT *v- > h- <sup>3</sup>

It seems reasonable to assume that all the aspirated stops may show two forms; one shows no tone alternation, and the other an alternation of tone series 1 to series 2. For example, what have been reconstructed as \*tɸ- and \*ph must also be given two forms each.

	<i>Siamese</i>	<i>White Tai</i>	<i>Lungchow</i>	<i>Po-ai</i>
PT <u>*th</u>	th-	th-	th-	t-
PT <u>*tɸ</u>	th-	th-	th-	t-(< PNT *d-)
PT <u>*ph</u>	ph-	ph-	ph-	p-
PT <u>*pɸ</u>	ph-	ph-	ph-	p-(< PNT *b-)



This assumption seems to explain a fairly large number of tone alternations<sup>4</sup> of this type, but by no means explains all alternations of tones.<sup>5</sup>

#### NOTES

1. In the following examples, letters A or C after the cited forms indicate the tone class, and the numeral 1 indicates that the initial consonant was originally voiceless. (Li 1977:25).

2. See appropriate sections on PT aspirated stops and on \*x- in Li (1977:63-5, 102-4, 192-8, 207-14).
3. PNT (Proto-Northern-Tai) \*g- and \*ɣ are assumed because they give the same reflexes in the modern Northern Tai dialects as PT \*g- and \*ɣ .
4. There are other types of tone alternation, such as B2 ~ C2, C1 ~ B1, C1 ~ B2, etc. It is impossible to take them into consideration at this juncture.
5. Professor William Gedney proposed a new series of voiced initials in Proto-Tai in a paper at the Sino-Tibetan Conference in Paris in 1979. The paper is not published\* but, while his idea agrees in general with mine, the reconstructions are different.

#### REFERENCES

- |                           |   |
|---------------------------|---|
| Burnay, J. &<br>G. Coedès | 1928.  et  et leur origines.<br><i>J. Siam Soc.</i> 21 (2), 119-26. |
| Li Fang-Kuei              | 1977. <i>A handbook of comparative Tai</i><br>(Oceanic Linguistics Spec. Pubs. 15).<br>Honolulu: Univ. Press Hawaii.  |

---

\* Professor Gedney's paper, 'Evidence for another series of voiced initials in Proto-Tai', has now been published in his *Selected papers on comparative Tai studies* ed. R.J. Bickner et al. (Michigan papers on South and Southeast Asia 29, 1989, 229-69). (Ed.)