

CULTURAL ASPECTS OF PROTO-TAI LANGUAGE

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Yunnan is the most important birthplace of mankind. Remains of the primitive man ramapithecus were found at Dai Yuan in 1950, and since then, many fossil men have been discovered. Professor Chen Lü Fan, Director of the Southeast Asia Research Institute of Yunnan, gave this chronological summary:

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| Ramapithecus Dai Yuan | 14,000,000 years BP |
| Ramapithecus Lu Feng | 8,000,000 years BP |
| Ramapithecus Hudie | 4,000,000-3,000,000 years BP |
| Eastern man | 2,500,000 years BP |
| Yuan Mo man | 1,700,000 years BP |
| Si Kao man | 100,000 years BP |
| Li Jiang man | 30,000-20,000 years BP |

(Chen Lü Fan 1996)

This evidence lends support to the hypothesis that the human race originated in Asia and has led paleoanthropologists to search for the birthplace of the human race on the Suan Kwang Phong Plateau of Yunnan.

1. The Birthplace of the Tai

The Yunnan Multidisciplinary Archeological Research Team, which commenced operations at Yuan Mo in March 1987, excavated 41 teeth of Eastern man (2,500,000 years BP), 119 teeth of Ramapithecus Hudie (3,000,000-4,000,000 years BP) and remains of a hundred types of animals, including a long-armed ape, a three-toed horse, a large-lipped rhinoceros, and interestingly, the jaw of a panda-like animal, as reported in the newspaper Yunnan Ri Pao of March 23, 1987, and April 12, 1987, and in a Chin Hua news report on June 29, 1987 (Chen Lü Fan 1996).

The remains of Eastern man found at Yuan Mo, which are 2,500,000 years old, are the oldest human remains so far discovered on earth. The name signifies that Eastern man is the ancestor of the peoples of the East, including the Tai. Also found at Yuan Mo were 1,700,000-year old remains of Yuan Mo man and a great number of Paleolithic implements between 600,000 and 30,000 years old. In addition, sites representing a variety of Neolithic cultures have been discovered in Yunnan. This indicates that human beings have dwelt in what is now Yunnan no less than 2,500,000 years. At present, Yunnan is inhabited by a wide variety of peoples.

2. Tai cultural vocabulary in languages of the Austro-Thai family

Paul K. Benedict (1975) proposed the Austro-Thai family of languages, composed of Tai, Kadai, and Indonesian. He believed that Chinese was not genetically related because of syntactic differences and that common vocabulary was due to borrowing.

Ancient vocabulary of the Tai, Kadai, Indonesian family reflecting Tai culture includes:

Nature: wan "sun" deuan "moon" dao "star" nam "water"
fai "fire" fon "rain" din "earth" theuan "forest, wild"

Plants: kla "rice seedling" lang "areca" phlu "betel"
pli "banana blossom" tawng "large leaf"
nga "sesame" bai "rice"

Animals: khwai "buffalo" ngua "cow" chang "elephant"
yang pha "goat antelope" pet "duck" kai "chicken"
nok "bird" khai "egg" thaw "rabbit" luang "dragon"
pheung "bee" taw "wasp" taen "hornet"

Metals: lek "iron" thawng daeng "copper" chin "tin"

Weaving: khawt "knot" khram "indigo" khem "needle"
hawm "plant used in dying" thaw "weave (cloth)"
san "weave (baskets)" wai "rattan" yep "sew"
tam "weave (on a loom)" thai "purse" huk "loom"
ki "loom" song "envelope" klawng "box"

Vehicle: reua "boat" sa-phao "a kind of boat" jaeo "oar"
sampan "a kind of boat"

Agriculture: wan "sow broadcast" na "wet rice field"

suan "garden" khrok "monar" thai "plow"

Shelters: kra-dai "ladder" reuan "house" pra-tu "door"
ok kai "ridgepole"

Tools: khwan "ax" ba "shoulder (of ax)"

Food Preparation: tak "dip out" khem "salty"

yang "to roast" lam "to cook in a bamboo stem"

hung "to steam (rice)" dawng "to pickle" ang "basin"

kra-buai "dipper" dong "to dry cooked rice by placing
the pot over a fire after pouring off the water"

tau "fireplace"

Musical Instruments: klawng "drum" kraw "percussion sticks"

Among ancient cognates in the languages of the Austro-Thai family are those referring to landscape and weather. These words indicate that at the time the Tai lived together with the Austronesians about 6,000 years ago, they inhabited river valleys with plentiful rains wherein there were fields for planting rice, both transplanted and broadcast, and land for gardening. The tropical plants they grew were rice, banana, sesame, betel, and areca. They knew animals such as gorals, cows, buffaloes, ducks, and chickens, insects such as bees, wasps, and hornets, and minerals such as iron, copper, lead, and tin.

Ancient words indicating material culture include names of agricultural implements: axes, shouldered axes, axes for clearing forests, and ploughs yoked to buffaloes for ploughing fields; and names of utensils: water basin, coconut-shell ladle, and mortar for pounding food. The people cooked rice, roasted meat, measured amounts of grain, and used stoves in cooking.

Dwelling were elevated off the ground so that underneath there was an open and high space. The house was reached by climbing a ladder and entered through a door.

They knew how to weave, dye, and sew. They carded cotton with a bow-like implement and wove on a loom. They devised a small bag for holding things which could be tied to the waist with a rope.

These people built boats for travel on rivers, and these were propelled with paddles. They also sailed junks on the

sea, and there are some words referring to the framework of boats such as kong. They also used drums and sticks (kraw).

3. Cultural vocabulary in the Sino-Thai Family

Early linguists such as Henri Maspero (1920) and Kurt Wulff (1934) (Cited in Valaya Changkhwanyuen 1983) believed that Tai and Chinese were genetically related, and this view was also put forward by Fang-kuei Li in his 1977 reconstruction of ancient Chinese.

The Thai scholar Phraya Anuman Rajadhon found many Thai words corresponded to words in Cantonese, the variety of Chinese which preserves more ancient phonological features than any other variety, and suggested that Tai and Chinese may have both arisen from a common parent language and that the Cantonese and the Tai peoples may have common ancestry.

Sawnklin Phisetsakonkit (1946) compared Tai and Cantonese words in her Chulalongkorn University master's degree thesis "How useful are Chinese and Thai dialects in investigating the etymology of Thai words?" and proposed that Tai and Chinese belonged to the same language family.

Praphin Manomaivibool (1975) in her University of Washington (U.S.A.) doctoral dissertation "A study of Sino-Thai lexical correspondences" compared Standard Thai words with words of Middle Chinese (ca. A.D. 600-1000) and of Old Chinese (ca. 3,100 BP) and found many correspondences between Thai and Middle Chinese. Thus, Tai and Chinese must have had an ancient relationship of no less than 3,100 years and this leads to the belief that the two have a genetic relationship. If these correspondences are borrowings, then the borrowing must have occurred in the Proto-Tai period.

Rev. Princeton S. Hsü in his "Origin of the Thai People," translated into Thai by Professor Chin Yudi (1968) and published in *Sinlapakorn*, stated, "The first Chinese dictionary 'Er Yah,' which was composed in the early period of the Chow dynasty, about 3,000 years ago" contained many Tai words, for example "Mah-Kang-Lang (praying mantis), Ching-Leet (cricket), Nawn (caterpillar) and Mah-Laang Bpwawing (malaeng paw wing)." It also contains the

interesting sentence “the offspring of Dok Nawn is Pee Seu,” which is phrased as in Thai, and also:

In the chapter on cattle, Wai (or Khwy) is given as the ancient name of bufflao. Khwychow in the eastern section of Szecheun province was named just because there was a rock in the Yangtse River with a buffalo feature. Happy to say, the Thai-Chuang name for buffalo is actually Khwy or Wai.

The fact that many Tai words appear in the “Er Yah” shows that Tai and Chinese have a relationship of no less than 3,000 years, and thus it is possible that the two languages are of common origin or that these words were borrowed from Tai at the time of the Chow [Chou] dynasty.

The Swedish linguist Karlgren (data from Nareumon Thepchai 1988) investigated the pronunciation of Chinese characters during the Chou dynasty, 3,000 years ago, using rhyme books compiled by Chinese scholars, and his work is accepted as the standard reference on ancient Chinese. However, the rhyming books do not represent any one dialect, not even that of the capital Chi-an; rather, they are a composite compiled by scholars from many dialect areas, as is explained in the introductions to the rhyme books. The use of the rhyme books thus presents certain difficulties and raises doubts as to whether Ancient Chinese and Middle Chinese (A.D. 500-1000) are directly related.

Nareumon Thepchai (1988) of New York University observed that China is inhabited by many peoples speaking more than fifty languages. The Chinese regard themselves as a people of high civilization, but the question is whether or not this civilization is actually Chinese and when the first actually Chinese empire was founded. There is no record of the actual extent of the territory governed by the earliest dynasty, the Hsia, but it is known that at that time, 3,500 years ago, there were independent states in southern Shansi which were familiar with the use of copper or bronze. The following

dynasty, the Shang (about 3,050 years ago) had writings which contained the names of various peoples.

The Chou, who followed the Shang, although having their own language, adopted the orthography of their predecessors. Inscriptions provide clear evidence that inhabitants of eastern China who had been under the rule of the Shang regarded the Chou as a separate people.

The name Hsia in the Hsia dynasty means that this dynasty is the oldest. Originally, it referred to inhabitants of eastern China who later joined with the Chou dynasty after the founding of the eastern capital in Shensi near Hsi-an, or Sian, a name which may some way be related to Siam or Sayam.

The Thai name for Chinese, "Jin," derives from the name of the Ch'in dynasty, which held power for 20 years, from about 221 B.C. to about 206 B.C. Chinese invaders are apt to be called "Hun," which is derived from the name of the Han dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 220), during which period the Han sent armies to the south and southwest to pacify territories which the Chinese called the Barbarian Lands. Most of the surviving records originated during the Han dynasty and were written for political purposes: to subjugate the various polities of this area, which were inhabited by Austronesian, Tibeto-Burman, and Tai peoples. Many scholars have proposed that many elements of civilization, including rice cultivation and animal husbandry, had been practiced in this region prior to the Han invasion.

Edward H. Schafer (data from Jamnong Thawngprasoet 1984) wrote the book *Ancient China*, in which he states that most of the emotional and imaginative elements of Chinese culture, which today are regarded as Chinese, in fact originated from Tai peoples formerly dwelling in the south, Tibetan peoples formerly dwelling in the west, and Mongolian peoples formerly dwelling in the north.

Likhit Huntrakun (1966) in his book *History of Thai and Chinese Relations*, stated that King Siao Hao, or Siao Noi (2597-2514 B.C.) was a son of Emperor Wang Ti (the Yellow Emperor), the first Chinese emperor, and his descendants were designated by royal edict the "Thai-Thai" lineage. Thus, King Hao was the founder of the Thai family (about 4,500 years ago), and Thais of

former times would tell their descendants that they were descended from King Hao.

Samak Burawat (1976) in his book *Tai-Chinese Culture*, identifies a Tai-Chinese period in Chinese history, including the legendary period (10,000-2356 B.C.), the Hsia dynasty (2356-1766 B.C.), the Shang dynasty (1766-1122 B.C.), the western Chou dynasty (1122-770 B.C.), and the eastern Chou dynasty (770-249 B.C.). Following this is the period in which Thai-Chinese culture disappeared, and separate Tai states were formed in the period of the Great Wall (249-206 B.C.). Thus, the period in which Chinese culture separated from Tai culture was the Han dynasty and the period of the Warring Kingdoms (206 B.C.-A.D. 222). After this is the true Chinese period, which begins with the period of civil war (A.D. 222-618).

Therefore, in analyzing Tai culture in prehistoric China, the author believes that before the Han invaded the south, i.e., the period in which Chinese culture separated from Tai culture which began during the Han dynasty, the culture of that region was that of the people the Chinese called *Pai Yeh*.

Professor Jang Kong Jin of the Chinese Institute of Peoples in his book *The Tai Peoples of China* (data from Phongjin 1987) discusses the archaeological site Hoe Mu Tu in Joe Jiang, which is dated to 7,000 years BP and which is important in investigating the origin of the Tai. Joe Jiang was formerly inhabited by the ancient Yeh. The Hoe Mu Tu culture had four special characteristics: 1) rice was cultivated by transplanting seedlings into flooded fields, 2) spades made of bone and axes made of stone were used in preparation of the fields, 3) livestock was raised, and 4) a structure called *kan lan* had been developed; this was a dwelling and was elevated high off the ground. All of these characteristics were unique to *Pai Yeh*, who were a Tai people.

Professor Jiang Eung Liang (1987) of Yunnan University in his book *History of the Thai* summarized the special characteristics shared by the *Pai Yeh*:

The Yeh included the ancient peoples: the Jo, the Liu, the Pai Phu, the Lao Li, the Golden Teeth, and the Pai I as well as the Tai, the Sui, the Tang, the Pu I, and the Li, and today they are all one group. The special characteristics of the Pai Yeh were that they all lived in the same region, they had the same language, the economic basis of their livelihood was the same: farming, weaving, and using boats for transportation, and they had the same culture and customs, including the use of *mahoratheuk* drums, tattooing the body, and dwelling in elevated houses.

4. Proto-Tai belief concerning the dragon

Law. Sathiansut (1986) in the book *Chinese Cultural History* states that the belief in the dragon, which the Chinese call "leng" or "long," originated in the reign of Emperor Wang Ti, the Yellow Emperor, about 4,700 years ago. The Yellow Emperor instituted the dragon as the symbol of China. This he did in order to be fair to all the peoples who were thus joined together, and thus a part of the totem animal of each group was incorporated in the dragon, and the name "long" was given it to signify that it was the lord of all creatures. It was as well the symbol of the righteous ruler, and the emperor was regarded a golden dragon who had come to be born on earth. The word "long" had a place in the royal language, in which it was placed before a noun, while among the Tai, it was placed after a noun, as for example in "wang luang" (royal palace).

According to Chinese historical records, at the time of Emperor Wang Ti, China was not yet completely Chinese, and a son of the Emperor, namely King Hao, was the progenitor of the Tai. Thus, the belief in the dragon is likely to have originated from the folk wisdom of the Tai. Evidence of this is the Tai word meaning "large" or "great," which is "luang," being used to refer to the dragon. It is also seen in the use by all Tai groups of the word "hung kin nam" for "rainbow." This is also found among other peoples who inhabited southern China, including the Meo-Yao, the Vietnamese, and the

Khmer, among whom "rong" is the word used for the year of the dragon. Benedict (1975) identifies dragon as a loan word in Chinese.

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