

THE MOVEMENT OF THAI SPEAKERS FROM THE TENTH THROUGH THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY: AN ART HISTORIAN'S VIEW

Hiram W. Woodward, Jr.

In 1964, some years before I came to Ann Arbor, I was teaching at Silpakorn University in Bangkok and became involved in setting up a symposium on the subject, "Who are the ancestors of the Thai?" I remember Bill Gedney from that time. Of course he was much too wise to actually participate in the symposium, but I was heartened that he took an interest, and his interest has given me courage to address today the problems of the movement of Thai speakers. From the wisdom that has restrained him from trying to answer questions that cannot be answered, I have, on the other hand, learned nothing.

I would like to be able to say that the 1964 symposium gave rise to all sorts of interdisciplinary cooperation and that our knowledge has increased manyfold in the past sixteen years. Alas, that is not the case. We know somewhat more--in certain areas there have been advances--but there has been no comprehensive effort to pull together information from various disciplines. In this paper I would like to make some general observations about the movement of Thai speakers and about the difficulties of obtaining and interpreting data; then I will discuss paths of movement--perhaps of groups of people, but not necessarily; and finally I will turn to the matter I understand least and know least about, namely, linguistic evidence.

The Thai art historian Piriya Krairiksh has proposed in recent years that we use the word "Mon" rather than "Dvāravatī" to describe the culture of the sixth through the tenth centuries. In Thailand itself Dr. Piriya's suggestion has received almost no support. There are plenty of academic criticisms that can be made, but beyond these there seem to be nationalistic sentiments and simple emotional responses: to say "Mon," not "Dvāravatī," is to say that Dvāravatī is not Thai and is therefore somehow foreign. To me the evidence is clear: the Mon-language inscriptions found at certain Dvāravatī sites mean

that Mon was the vernacular language. If only our vocabulary made it easier to distinguish between culture, race, and language! Dvāravatī is indeed the cultural ancestor of modern Thailand, and Dvāravatī people are physically the forefathers and foremothers of the modern Thai. Unfortunately, language seems to many of us to lie at the heart of both culture and race. If only we were able to realize that particular sounds are arbitrary, petty matters quite separable from race and culture. We can understand, therefore, but must regret, that the word “Mon” makes Dvāravatī culture and Dvāravatī people seem alien.

We cannot build a theory, however, on the notion of Thai words floating over and landing on a Mon Dvāravatī, leaving race untainted and allowing culture to grow in its mysterious ways. People have to move. Yet we have no solid evidence to show how or why they moved. As far as Dvāravatī is concerned, there is no particular sign of rupture until about the middle of the tenth century. King Rājendravarman of Cambodia, who came to the throne in 944, was said in an inscription of 946 to have been “victorious in combat against the powerful and wicked Rāmaṇya”—evidently the people of Monland. It does seem that Cambodia expanded at this point in time, but we know nothing about the local conditions that allowed, for instance, a Khmer-style temple (Müang Khaek) to be built near Müang Semâ, a Dvāravatī-type town in Khorat province, or the construction of the Khmer-influenced brick towers of Prāṅ Khaek in Lopburi. A number of Dvāravatī towns may have been abandoned in the tenth century, and it is around this time that we must suspect movements of Thai speakers.

But who were they? Groups of people, whole villages, following charismatic leaders into areas underpopulated or decimated by disease? Refugees? Resettled prisoners of war? We don't know. There is even little support from legend, so far as I know, for what seems to me to be a reasonable hypothesis, one that makes other matters explicable: that in the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries, Thai chieftans saw Khmers as their patrons, allowed themselves to be set up as loyal rulers of towns on the fringes of the expanding empire, and adopted, within limits, aspects of Cambodian culture.

The evidence of art history cannot tell us much about the reasons for movement, though the accumulated evidence does indeed make me favor this last hypothesis. Can art, on the other hand, tell us anything about paths of movement? Let us first ask what kinds of

The Movement of Thai Speakers

evidence we would like to have and are likely to have. Historical legends do offer some clues. It may be that unknown manuscripts will come to light and add to our fund of written sources, but I do not foresee anything of great magnitude being discovered. The same holds for inscriptions; they will continue to be found--especially interesting is the publication in recent years of Mon-language inscriptions found in the area of Vientiane--but no single inscription is going to solve all our problems. Perhaps the solution is to be found in archaeological evidence. In a broad sense this is true, yet there are severe limits to what archaeology can tell us. No total picture will emerge until we know more about when towns were settled, invaded, or abandoned, or when intrusive elements appeared. At the same time I doubt whether the archaeological evidence will ever tell us all we would like to know about ethnic identity. Burial practices, village location, house orientation, or the presence of a certain kind of irrigation work could, I suppose, turn out to distinguish Mon from Thai settlements, but that will have to be demonstrated. There are other matters in which it would be unwise to place hope. Pots were surely traded, but if they were not, Thais and Mons must have exchanged shapes and techniques. If burial was practiced, the physical characteristics of the skeletons will not tell us anything conclusive (though some might think they may). Archaeological recovery of settlement patterns within a village is at best a remote hope.

The evidence of art is also archaeological. Works of art cannot help us at all if we do not know where they were found or cannot compare them to something with a known findspot. But architectural remains have not moved, and portable art objects are more easily visible in museums and are better published than potsherds because they have a more varied appeal. Similarities between two works of art from two different places, of course, need not indicate anything at all about the movement of groups of people. There are numerous ways art styles can spread. A religious leader might move from one place to another, or be moved by a ruler, and impose what he thinks is a proper style. A craftsman might travel, or be invited by a ruler, or be captured and moved. A craftsman might travel and study in some strange place and then return home. In a time of political expansion, a local ruler might find it in his interest to build a temple in cosmopolitan style. City-states might form long-range alliances; a queen might have been born far away, and her good works introduce the art style of her birthplace. All these possibilities mean that when

art styles spread, someone must move, but not necessarily groups of people.

Having now suggested some of the dangers of using art-historical evidence, let me proceed as if these dangers did not exist. I want first to discuss migration from east to west, or from northeast to southwest, and secondly cultural influence more or less in the opposite direction, from peninsular Thailand into central Thailand. I will have to omit evidence regarding all sorts of other movement, and I will not be able to review the various interpretations that can be made of the evidence upon which my own suggestions rest.

As for east-west or northeast-southwest movement, there is first the matter of boundary stones in northeast Thailand and Thaton, Burma; then the links between Phimâi, Wat Mahâthât in Lopburi, and Ayutthaya; and, third, ties between the Vientiane and Sukhothai regions. Piriya Krairiksh, in an important article published in 1974, pointed out the stylistic similarities between boundary stones found at Fâ Daet in Kalasin province and those at the Kalyāṇī-Sīmā in Thaton. At neither place are the stones firmly dated, but there are good reasons for putting the Fâ Daet steles late in the Dvāravatī period--no earlier than the ninth century and possibly as late as the eleventh--and the Thaton boundary stones in the eleventh. The people of Fâ Daet left Mon-language inscriptions, and the people of Thaton have of course remained Mon. References in chronicles to a "Krom" invasion--at least partly confirmed by inscriptions--could mean that Cambodia attacked Thaton in the eleventh century. If there were disruptions that involved Khmers and Mons at this time, however, and if Mons did move from northeastern Thailand to Thaton--a movement which, there is evidence to suggest, would also have touched Lamphûn--it seems reasonable to suppose that Thai speakers were somehow also involved.

The Tantric Buddhist temple of Phimâi in Khorat province dates from around A.D. 1100. It was built, in my opinion, by a powerful local ruler who wanted simultaneously to proclaim his own importance and freedom of action, on one hand, and his loyalty to the then-weak Khmer monarch on the other. The main temple at Wat Mahâthât in Lopburi copies Phimâi in a number of ways. We have no exact date for it; it was probably built in the thirteenth century, in a period of political independence following the death of the last great Khmer monarch, Jayavarman VII, but there is a possibility that it was started in an earlier period of independence in the second half of the

The Movement of Thai Speakers

twelfth century. One of the earliest temples of Ayutthaya, Wat Phuthaisawan, said to have been founded in 1353, is in turn dependent on the Mahâthât in Lopburi. The close connections between Ayutthaya and Lopburi are well established by the Ayutthaya chronicles, but I know of no legends or references in chronicles that suggest a consciousness in central Siam of Phimâi. Perhaps we should conclude from this absence that the link between Phimâi and Lopburi was entirely due, say, to ties among members of *Khmer*-speaking ruling families. Once again, however, an involvement of Thai speakers (and the presence of Thai speakers at Phimâi) seems to me the best explanation for all sorts of phenomena—including both the influence of *Khmer* culture on Siam and the remarkable impact of the Thai language on Cambodian, which we are grateful to Frank Huffman for writing about in 1973.

The third connection is the one between the Vientiane and Sukhothai regions. Others have suggested such connections, on the basis of evidence from legend or in Râm Khamhaeng's inscription. The sculptural evidence for links is not plentiful, but I would like to propose that the style of the Wang Sang Buddhas outside Vientiane, of perhaps A.D. 1006, had a counterpart in woodcarving, and that this style of woodcarving was carried to the Sukhothai region. Some evidence for this is provided by bronzes of the twelfth or thirteenth century, said to come from Phitsanulok province. They indicate what image makers in the Sukhothai area may have been creating before the development of a sophisticated Sukhothai style in the fourteenth century.

The first link of which I spoke took us as far west as Thaton. In talking now about movements in a different direction, I want to wander south from Thaton into the peninsula. A Burmese involvement in the affairs of the northern part of the peninsula is demonstrated by an inscription from the reign of the late-twelfth-century Burmese monarch, Narapatisithu, by the chronicles of Nakhon Si Thammarat, and by the style of the so-called Buddha of Grahi, perhaps of A.D. 1183. I would like to be able to point out to you documented examples of influence from the south on the art of the city of Lopburi in the thirteenth century. I cannot do that. There are too many ifs; our dates are so uncertain. What does seem to be the case, however, is that after the death of Jayavarman VII of Cambodia (or even before), when an independent Lopburi turned away from imperial *Khmer* religious and aesthetic ideals, more important than the presence of older Dvāravatī works of art were

living traditions--Burmese in particular. We can say that not all Burmese ideas reached Siam through Lamphûn; there were other routes, and the Burmese presence in the peninsula may have been significant. There are a few Lopburi stone images of about the first quarter of the thirteenth century that suggest the possibility of outside influence. They lead us to such works as a small bronze image found in Suphanburi province. It, in turn, leads to a fragmentary image from the peninsula, perhaps of the twelfth century, having ties to Burma and Sri Lanka as well as to Dvāravatī. Subsequently, of course, there is other evidence of influences stemming from the south. Most of us know about Rām Khamhaeng's patriarch at the end of the thirteenth century, said to have come from Nakhon Si Thammarat, and about the travels of the Sihing Buddha image, which reached Chiang Mai from the peninsula in the fourteenth century.

Now, what happens when linguistic evidence is added to the data and interpretations I have so far presented? On the chart Marvin Brown published in 1965, there are three major divisions--one for the Southern Thai dialects at the bottom, one for Central and Northern Thai at the top, and one for the Northeastern Thai and Lao dialects in the middle. We must imagine something like waves of movement, three in number, corresponding to the three major groups. The ancestor of the southern dialects was brought in the first wave--a wave which might historically be connected with the movement of Mon speakers (perhaps in the eleventh century) from northeastern Thailand to Thaton, as suggested by the boundary stones. A second wave occurred a little later, when speakers of the parent of Central Thai entered the plains, at least some of them coming from the Phimâi region along the route of today's railway line and Friendship Highway. Their language displaced any remnants of first-wave dialects.

The Friendship Highway route does not account very well for the languages of Lannathai or the Shan states, however, and here I suspect that the classification by Fang-Kuei Li, found in his 1977 *Handbook*, can help us. Marvin Brown's chart puts Central and Northern Thai and Shan in a single subfamily, but Li's analysis of tones would exclude Northern Thai and Shan from such a subfamily. He groups Southern Thai, Central Thai, and Lao in one encompassing family, maintaining, if I understand him correctly, that all three descended from a common ancestor which is *not* the ancestor of either Shan or the dialects of Lanna. In Li's view, Proto-Tai initial consonants have split themselves into three groups corresponding

The Movement of Thai Speakers

to the *suung*, *klaang*, and *tam* classification in Southern and Central Thai and Lao, but not in other dialects or languages. Li's division permits us, therefore, to see the languages of northern Siam as penetrating from a different direction than Central Thai. The art-historical evidence I presented to you does not bear directly on the question of the Northern Thai dialects, and so let us put aside the problems of movement in the north.

Returning to northeastern Thailand, we have to propose a third wave of movement, the bulk of which took place in recent centuries and must be presumed to have eradicated remnants of earlier Thai languages. With these northeasterners in place, the successive northeast-southwest migrations came to an end.

Returning to the matter of cultural influence in the opposite direction (or, to put it another way, influence of the long-established settlers upon the newcomers), let us consider the Thai writing system. We must assume that each of the tone markers, *mai ek* and *mai thoo*, when invented, was a fixed sign, that is, not subject to varying interpretation depending on the initial consonant. But I do not think we have to assume that the tone markers found in Râm Khamhaeng's inscription of the late thirteenth century were necessarily invented by him. When the monarch said, "these Thai letters," he may simply have had in mind a feature such as his peculiar method of vowel placement. We do not know exactly when initial consonants began to affect Thai tones and break down the simple three-tone system implied by Râm Khamhaeng's tone markers or reconstructed by historical linguistics. Professor Gedney, in his unpublished article on Thai verse forms, wrote, "That the earlier three-tone system prevailed up to the founding of Ayutthaya in 1350 A.D. and for some centuries afterward seems certain; the early poetic works of the Ayutthaya period undoubtedly were composed in the earlier three-tone language." If this is the case, the tone markers of Râm Khamhaeng's inscription reflected a contemporary and widespread reality and pose no particular historical problem.

I would like, however, to look back at the arguments of Marvin Brown, who believed that the breakdown of the three-tone system occurred earlier, in fact much earlier, sometime around A.D. 1000. If this is the case, the tone markers of Râm Khamhaeng's inscription do need explanation. Brown saw a connection between these tone markers and Southern Thai, the dialects of which seem to preserve the old three-tone system to a much greater extent than do the

languages of any other region. If Râm Khamhaeng's tone markers are in fact an anomaly, I wonder if we can be helped by considering the importance of lower Burma and the peninsula, of which I spoke. If my reconstruction is correct, the southern Thai are the longest-established Thai in Thailand. Engaged in cultural intercourse with Burma in the twelfth century, by the thirteenth they may have been influencing developments in Lopburi. Might this position of influence have extended as well to Thai script and to the system of tone markers found in Râm Khamhaeng's inscription? If such is the case, then Râm Khamhaeng's tone markers do not necessarily reflect the spoken language of Sukhothai.

Having posed this question, I would like to close with an elaborate joke, a mock scenario that carries forward some of these ideas. I take my evidence from Thai translations of the Mon Chronicle and the Mon historical romance, *Rājādhirāj*. A wealthy Mon named Makathô (Māgadu) rebelled against the Burmese governor of Martaban in 1281 and became ruler. Makathô had previously been in the service of the king of Sukhothai. Let us suppose that Makathô, before he went to Sukhothai, had learned to read and write Thai from a peninsular Thai. After serving Phra Ruang, king of Sukhothai, Makathô absconded with the monarch's daughter. Near the border he wrote a message to the king, describing a vision he had been granted and apologizing for abducting the princess. The message concludes, "I grievously erred. I beg royal forgiveness. May your Majesty forgive me this one time." The message was discovered and taken back to Phra Ruang, who read it, and, realizing that the future rulers of Monland would be his descendants, forgave Makathô. In what language and script was Makathô's message written? Phra Ruang—that is, Râm Khamhaeng—read it without difficulty at a time before his own inscription had been erected. Obviously, we must conclude, the letter was written in Thai, in a script known to Râm Khamhaeng, but with tone markers Makathô had learned from a southern Thai. So impressed was the king by this touching letter that he used its tone markers in his own inscription.

The Movement of Thai Speakers

Bibliographical Postscript

My paper appears here just as presented at the conference, with only minor deletions and changes of wording. The greater part of the facts and theories in the paper can be found, in rather different form, in my doctoral dissertation, "Studies in the Art of Central Siam, 950–1350 A.D." (Yale University, 1975).

Mon language. The whole question has been put in a new perspective by Gérard Diffloth's convincing proposal that the Nyah-Kur people of Phetchabun province are linguistically the descendants of the Dvāravatī Mon. See his "Reconstructing Dvāravatī–Old-Mon" in *Cāruk booraan run ræek phop thii lopburii lœ klai khiṇ* (Bangkok: Fine Arts Department, 1981), 117–27. Dr. Piriya's nomenclature was put forward in *Bœp sinlapa nai pratheet thai/Art Styles in Thailand* (Bangkok: Fine Arts Department, 1977). For Vientiane-area inscriptions, see E. Guillon, "Recherches sur quelques inscriptions môn," *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient* 61 (1974):339–48.

Boundary stones. See Piriya Krairiksh, "Semas with Scenes from the Mahānīpātā-Jātakas in the National Museum at Khon Kaen," in *Sinlapa lœ booraankhadii nai pratheet thai/Art and Archaeology in Thailand* (Bangkok: Fine Arts Department, 1974), 35–65. For Lamphûn, see Mr. Srisakra's article in the same volume ("Khween hariphunchai"), pp. 260–69. The chronology of the boundary stones needs to be reexamined, however. An important geographical survey is Sîsak Wanliphôdom [Srisakra Vallibhotama], *Sêmâ isân* [The Sema complex of the northeast], *Muang Boran Journal* 2, no. 1 (January–March 1975):89–116.

Thai-Khmer. See Franklin E. Huffman, "Thai and Cambodian: A Case of Syntactic Borrowing?" *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 93 (1973):488–509. It is at least possible that the form of certain numerals or "pseudo-numerals" I have placed in Battambang province in the 1180s is to be explained by the presence of Thai speakers. See Hiram W. Woodward, Jr., "Some Buddha Images and the Cultural Developments of the Late Angkorian Period," *Artibus Asiae* 42 (1980):162 (on this page the numbers of the figures should be increased by one: figure 16 should be figure 17, etc.).

Vientiane-Sukhothai. For connections, see A. B. Griswold, "Thoughts on a Centenary," *Journal of the Siam Society* 52, no. 1

(April 1964):36. Wang Sang is best illustrated in Pierre-Marie Gagneux, "Les sculptures rupestres de Vang Sang," *La Revue Française de l'Élite Européenne*, no. 203 (October 1967):40-43. One Phitsanulok bronze of the sort mentioned appears as figures 417-18 in Woodward, "Studies in the Art of Central Siam."

Peninsula. See David K. Wyatt, trans., *The Crystal Sands: The Chronicles of Nagara Sri Dharmmaraja*, Data Paper, no. 98 (Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1975), 72. Concerning influence through Lamphûn, I am referring to arguments of Jean Boisselier in "Réflexions sur l'École d'U Thong et l'art de Haripuhjaya," in *Sinlapa lee booraankhadii*, 131-42. Concerning influence on Lopburi, the images mentioned are illustrated or referred to in Woodward, "Some Buddha Images," 158 and figs. 4-6.

Linguistic evidence. Some of this evidence might be reconsidered in light of John F. Hartmann, "A Model for the Alignment of Dialects in Southwestern Tai," *Journal of the Siam Society* 68, pt. 1 (January 1980):72-86. For Brown's chart, see J. Marvin Brown, *From Ancient Thai to Modern Dialects* (Bangkok: Social Science Association Press, 1965), reference sheet 10. For Li's analysis, see Fang-Kuei Li, *A Handbook of Comparative Tai* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1977), 49.

Thai writing system. Professor Gedney's article, "Siamese Verse Forms in Historical Perspective," was presented at a conference on Southeast Asian aesthetics in Ithaca, New York, in August 1978. It is to be published in William J. Gedney, *Selected Papers on Comparative Tai Studies*, edited by Robert J. Bickner, John Hartmann, Thomas John Hudak, and Patcharin Peyasantiwong (Ann Arbor: Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, The University of Michigan), forthcoming. Evidence for the preservation of the three-tone system in comparatively recent times can be found in Robert J. Bickner's University of Michigan doctoral dissertation ("A Linguistic Study of a Thai Literary Classic," 1981). For the earlier breakdown, see J. Marvin Brown, "The Language of Sukhothai," *Sangkhomsaaparaithat*, special issue, no. 3 (June 1966):40-41. At the Thai studies conference in New Delhi, February 1981, Dr. Prasert na Nagara presented an argument similar to mine (but without the closing whimsicality). He suggested that the tone markers of the Rām Khamhaeng inscription were the responsibility of the monarch's southern patriarch.