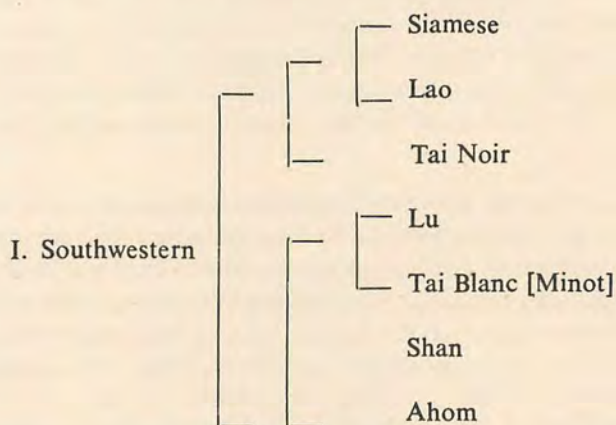


A MODEL FOR THE ALIGNMENT OF DIALECTS IN SOUTHWESTERN TAI

by

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This article is an exercise in linguistic geography encompassing the region of Southwestern Tai, the term used by F.K. Li (1959) in his work on the classification of Tai languages. In Li (1960) there is a concluding sketch of the subdivisions within Southwestern Thai that is of note. Redrawn, it looks like the one below.

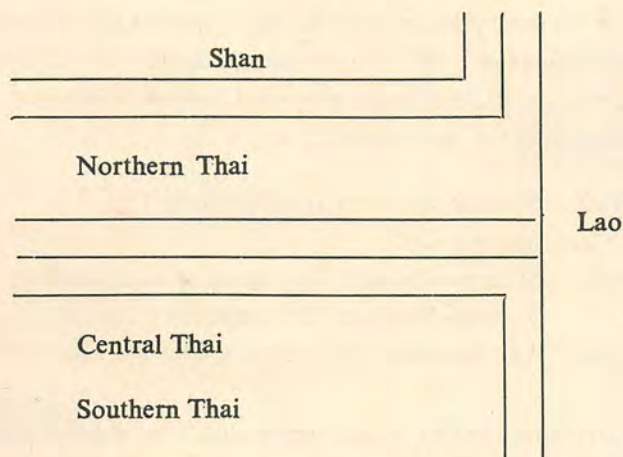


While it is only a rough sketch for which the details had not yet been worked out, it is interesting to see the close connection between Siamese and Lao clearly drawn.

Perhaps the next most significant attempt at subcategorization of Southwestern Thai was the work of Brown (1965). He used two diagrams, one showing mutual intelligibility and another diagramming the lines of historical development of the modern dialects from an ancient source in Yunnan. His picture of degrees of similarity between modern dialects appears as follows. The fewer the number of lines between dialects indicates greater "contact type similarities".

Brown's chart is designed to show rough geographical relationships as well as degrees of mutual intelligibility. Accordingly, as a measure of degree of contact, Lao is only once removed from Northern Thai but twice from Central and Southern. Central Thai is thrice removed from Northern and five times from Shan, etc.

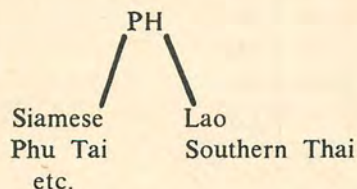
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In the reference sheets to the same work, Brown offers a sketch of the 'family tree' (p. 179) of modern Thai dialects, wherein it is shown that Shan and Central Thai, contrary to what appears in his diagram of contact similarities, are from an earlier Chieng Saen branch while Lao emerged as an offshoot of a Yunnan parent, the sister of the Chieng Saen branch *ca.* 1150 A.D. According to the same genealogy, too complex to replicate here, Southern Thai broke off even earlier, separating from a Yunnanese sister language *ca.* 950 A.D. History and geography do not coincide in Brown's scheme, and he is careful to point this out.

Since—and even before—Brown published his reconstruction of ancient Thai, most scholars have rejected the hypothesis of a Yunnan homeland for the parent language. It is generally accepted now that the origin of Proto-Tai is somewhere in the region around the border of the north of Viet Nam and China. Thus, it is all the more appropriate that Li gave the label "Southwestern" to the dialects under study here. It indicates the general direction of the migration of the Tai peoples: west and south, over a fan-shaped area.

A more recent classification of Southwestern Tai in Chamberlain (1975) shows still another set of permutations between Siamese, Lao and Southern Thai. In it a clear Lao-Southern Thai link is established in opposition to a separate branch for Siamese and other dialects. Accordingly:



In view of the foregoing, we might pause to ask a question which brings a focus, or at least a beginning point, to the study of the alignment of dialects in Southwestern Tai. With Siamese (Central Thai) as the focal point, we might ask where it stands *vis-à-vis* surrounding dialects. In Haas (1958), for example, the tonal system of Siamese is regarded as a reduction of

the Chiangmai array, but "in most other respects Siamese and Nakhon-Sithammarat are much closer than Siamese and Chiangmai". We can now summarize the views of four linguists on the relationship of Siamese to other dialects, bearing in mind that each author used quite different approaches. In chronological order, the arguments are:

- Haas: Siamese-Southern Thai/Northern Thai
 Li: Siamese-Lao
 Brown: Siamese-Southern Thai (geographical, contact)
 Siamese-Northern Thai (genetic)
 Chamberlain: Lao-Southern Thai; Siamese-Phu Tai, etc.

Turning now to Hartmann (1976a), it was shown that Lao, Siamese and Southern Thai were one continuous group standing in opposition to the remaining dialects to the north, further divided into two major subgroups. The three major divisions were arrived at primarily by using Haudricourt's notion of bipartition and tripartition, reinforced by other phonological changes held in common. Accordingly, areas that underwent two-way and then three-way splitting allow us to "understand not only Bangkok Thai but the Lao dialects (including Northeastern Thai) and those of southern Thailand as well. These three areas have all participated in tripartition..." (p. 47).

Points within the three dialect areas were then listed. They included areas outside of the Southwestern Tai zone as well.

I. Zone of tripartition: High vs. Mid vs. Low
 (Siamese written consonants)

	A	B	C		Found in:
ph				High	Luang Prabang
					Loei
					Vientiane
p, b				Mid	Roi Et
					Ubon
					Khorat
ph				Low	Bangkok
					Chumphon
					Saek

A more detailed view of determining the patterns of tonal splitting in modern dialects of Tai is provided by the following display. It is based on the matrix developed by Gedney (1964, 1973). The only refinement added is a fifth division, following Li (1977).

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

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

D-s D-l = 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.

According to this chart, bifurcation or two-way splitting divides the three PT tones A, B, C into six, along the lines *vd (voiced) versus *vl (voiceless initials at the time of the split). Or, following the Siamese writing system, the two-way split puts the High-Mid in one class and the Low in another as determinants of modern tones.

Similarly, trifurcation or three-way splitting, in the case of the Lao-Siamese-Southern Thai group at least, divides the initials along the lines of High, Mid, Low, thus creating a possible maximum of nine tones on live or smooth syllable. No modern dialect of course has this many tones. Various tones (allotones at the early stage of the split) collapsed to reduce the number to as many as seven in Southern Thai and a few as four in Northeastern Thai.

The geographic spread of the dialects in Southwestern Tai that appear to have trifurcated cover the southernmost or lowest region of the Southwestern domain. Henceforth this group of dialects shall be referred to as Lower Southwestern Tai. Later, we shall see that there is a Middle and Upper Southwestern Tai group.

In addition to their having undergone a common tripartition, the dialects of Lower Southwestern Tai hold at least two other phonological changes in common. First is the progression of **vd > vl* (stage I) > aspirates (stage II). The second change is a lengthening of vowels, a process which appears to be of recent entry and is spreading northward into the Middle Southwestern Tai group at least. The emergence of the modern Low aspirate series from **voiceless consonants* is viewed here as the mechanism for triggering tripartition. That is, as the High (**aspirated voiceless stops*) and the Low aspirates began to merge in the modern Lower Southwestern dialects, homophony had to be avoided. This could be achieved by a reinterpretation of the tones in the High series to carry a new functional load lost in the merger of the High and Low aspirates. In summary, the progression from bipartition to tripartition and vowel lengthening appears as a feeding relation.

1. **vd > vl* (stage I)
2. Bipartition: High-Mid vs. Low
3. *vl > Low aspirates* (stage II)
4. Tripartition: High vs. Mid vs. Low
5. Vowel lengthening

Vowel lengthening is viewed as a subsequent development in Southwestern Tai. Quite possibly it is not involved in the obvious feeding relationship expressed in steps 1 to 4, and may have preceded or accompanied step 4. Following Li (1977), vowel length was not distinctive in Proto-Tai.

Following the argument in Brown (1965), the Lower Southwestern Tai dialects are viewed as having reached a contour stage in their development. In turn this has led to step 5 or vowel lengthening in these dialects. For further discussion of step 5 see Hartmann (1976b). The historical development of the Tai vowel system is detailed in Sarawit (1973) and Li (1977).

If it is granted that Lower Southwestern Tai can be defined by using the preceding five steps, it should be possible to draw an isogloss separating the Lower group from the remaining Southwestern dialects. Map 1 (at end of article) shows the line of demarcation. The line is really a 'floating' isogloss. By that it is meant that it may need adjustment as new data come in, or as correction of errors and omissions is called for. Too, as a geo-linguistic frontier, it is a zone of great change and variation, especially as regards vowel length.

For example, Egerod (1971) describes a great deal of variation of vowel length in Northern Thai just north of the isogloss. Mundhenk (1967), in a study of the same general region, registers discomfort about vowel length, too. Finally, to the east in northern Laos, Gedney (1964) reports similar misgivings about vowel length in Red Tai, which is just above the isogloss. He states:

The list of Red Tai vowels is the same as for Black Tai. At this early stage of the investigation, however, it is not certain whether there is a distinction in vowel length in other vowels than /a/ versus /aa/ ... The question is whether this [over-all vowel-length distinction] is really a Red Tai distinction or the result of contamination from Lao.

As we go north into northern Shan, Lue of Chieng Rung, White, Red and Black Tai, phonemic vowel length is definitely lost except for some small pockets. The data on vowel length suggest an isogloss between Lower and Middle-Upper Southwestern Tai just slightly north of the isogloss for the area of tripartition. Quite possibly, in some areas this isogloss for vowel length distinction could be allowed to float southward in some areas. For a look at its approximate position, see map 2.

We can now return to a more detailed discussion of delimiting dialect areas in Southwestern Tai based on bi- and tri-partition. The area of the latter has already been shown; the bulky evidence for calling this a zone of tripartition is presented toward the end of this article.

Here we begin to deal with the area of bipartition and a variant of bipartition, both of which represent separate subgroups of Southwestern Tai which I label Upper and Middle Southwestern Tai, respectively.

Simple bipartition can safely be assumed to have affected all branches and dialects of the Tai language family at some point in their history. In modern dialects this two-way split is preserved in the uppermost geographic reaches of Southwestern Tai, extending from western and northern varieties of Shan through Lue of Sipsongpanna and the Red, White and Black Tai mentioned earlier. The same type of simple bipartition extends even farther eastward through Western Nung, Nung, Lung Chao, Ning Ming, Wuming, dialects of Puyi South and Chuang. But for Southwestern Tai the following dialects are representative of the geographical spread, from east to west.

Bipartition: *vl *versus* *vd as found in:

	A	B	C	
ph				High
p, b				Mid
<hr style="border: 1px solid black;"/>				
p				Low

Red Tai
 Black Tai
 White Tai
 Lue Chieng Tung (Li)
 Lue Chieng Rung
 Shan (north)

Red Tai
Black Tai
White Tai
Lue Chieng Tung (Li)
Lue Chieng Rung
Shan (north)

Lastly, the group of Middle Southwestern Tai groups shows a pattern of tonal array that is considered here a variant or minor adjustment of the bipartite Upper type. The pattern is displayed below alongside dialects representative of the geographical coverage.

*vl friction and aspirates *versus*

*preglottalized and voiced consonants

Variant bipartition: found in: Shan Kengtung

Khuen Kengtung

Lue Moeng Yong

Chiengrai

Chiengmai

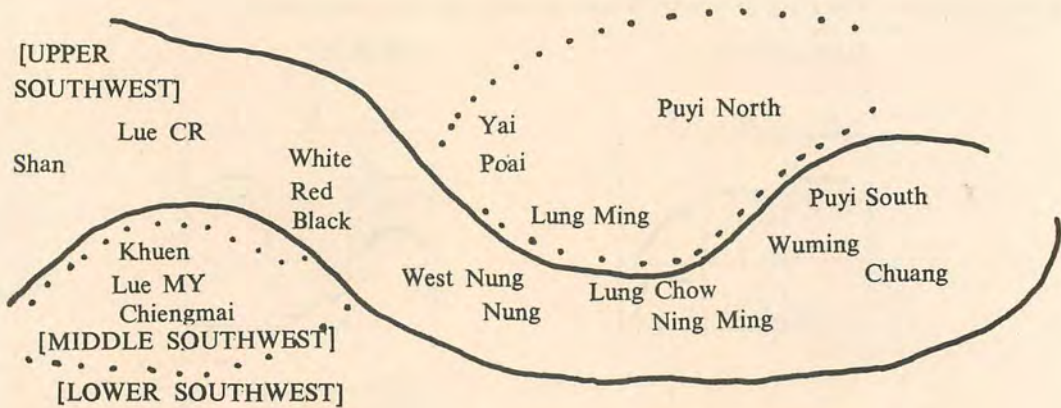
Nan, Phrae

Phayao, Tak

	A	B	C	
ph				High
p				Mid
b				
p				Low

It can be argued, as Haudricourt indeed does, that dialects of the Middle Southwestern type represent a three-way split rather than a variant of a two-way split. That point will not be contested here. It is only a minor point in this stage of the argument. The point at which the initials divide in the Middle group affects but few items in that it cuts across the A column only and moves only four initials into the *vd tonal category: *?b- *?d- *?y- *?. In this light, a split of this variety can be considered a minor adjustment of an original *vl/*vd split to account for the loss of a distinctive feature (pre-glottalization) in the series. Also, the Middle group did not participate in step 3, which was viewed as the mechanism triggering trifurcation. Vowel lengthening, step 5, where it does appear in the Middle group seems to be a recent innovation due most likely to the spread of Central Thai into the urban centers of northern Thailand. Finally, for the sake of convenience and clarity in later discussion of the case for tripartition in Lower Southwestern Thai, the Middle Southwestern Thai group is kept separate.

A split of the Mid class initials which may be related to the one found in Middle Southwestern Tai is also found in Yai, Poai, Lung Ming, and Puyi North. The details are presented in Hartmann (1976a). Here we merely note the connection and the relation of the Upper and Middle Southwestern Thai dialects to dialects to the east that show a similar history of tonal splits.



The dialects of Upper and Middle Southwestern Tai have split along the clearest lines. There seems to be little doubt about the unity of these two subgroups if examined from the standpoint of tonal splits. However, when we are pressed to demonstrate the unity of the Lower Southwestern group or Lao-Siamese-Southern Thai, the patterns of tonal development are not all that transparent. We proceed to examine the evidence presented in Hartmann (1976a) and Li (1977).

The clearest evidence of tripartition in Lower Southwestern Tai comes from the Southern Thai dialect at Nakhorn Sri Thammarat as recorded by Brown (1964) at dialect point 68. The three-way split runs completely through the three PT tones A B C. His chart shows that coalescence has taken place between B-C High and B-C Low, thus reducing the maximum of nine possible modern tones to seven. Only slightly different is the dialect at Yala, which has collapsed three allotones into one modern tone; the other six fill the remaining six cells. The tonal arrays of the two Southern dialects adapted from Brown (1964) appear below.

NAKORN SRI THAMMARAT

A	B	C

YALA

A	B	C	
			High
			Mid
			Low

When we move into the Central Thai or Siamese region and look at the Bangkok tonal array, tripartition is not as immediately apparent. However, if we put the Bangkok array alongside the not-too-distant and mutually intelligible dialects of Khorat, Roi-Et and Ubon, a pattern of a three-way split followed by idiosyncratic arrangements for coalescence in each

dialect emerges. They are drawn by Brown approximately as seen below.

BANGKOK

A	B	C

KHORAT

A	B	C

ROI-ET

A	B	C

UBON

A	B	C

It is especially illuminating to compare the A column of Bangkok with that of Roi-Et. Thanks to Brown's highly trained ear and commendable service of actually drawing out tonal contours, it appears that Roi-Et column A with its three-way split is beginning to resemble Bangkok A. Roi-Et's A-Mid and A-Low, both falling contours, seem to be verging close to coalescence, a process the Bangkok dialect went through at some earlier stage after tripartition.

From Bangkok to Vientiane and the northern limit of Southwestern Tai at Luang Prabang, there is also a shared development of a preference for coalescence in the B column, either B-Mid+High or B-Mid+High+Low, in the form of a register (Mid level) tone rather than a contour.

Similarly, A-High in these dialects shows a tendency toward a rising tone. Contrary to sentiments voiced by some students of comparative Tai, the actual shapes of tones can provide highly illuminating information on the development of tones in Tai dialects. Brown's presentation of his data, with charts showing individually drawn tonal shapes, is a model which should be emulated by all Tai field linguists.

Last and most perplexing, or perhaps least convincing, is the Luang Prabang dialect itself. It has the peculiar distinction of showing a split of A and C High versus A and C Mid+Low, leaving the B column untouched, i.e. with a single tone. At first glance, the Luang Prabang array looks like a simple bipartition, a flip-flop of the usual two-way split. A second, closer look reveals that it is instead a trifurcated dialect that has gone through the usual five steps

outlined earlier, but for which traces of steps 1 and 2 are all but lost. It is necessary to remember that bifurcation was defined as separating the PT voiced series from the rest of the PT initials as determinants of the first tonal split. It was axiomatic that all dialects had undergone the two-way split. Tripartition is the second-stage tonal split which effectively separates the High class initials from the remaining initials, which is exactly what the Luang Prabang dialect has done. Once this has been done, there really is no need to maintain the line separating the Low from the Mid class initials. In a sense, the Luang Prabang dialect is very modern in choosing to erase the bottom line.

Whether or not the changes common to Lower Southwestern Tai proceeded along the neat five-fold path as is pretended here, the delimitation of Lower Southwestern Tai as a geographical dialect area still stands. The isogloss in map 1 running through Tak, Loei, Luang Prabang and Sam Neua is a reasonably real, albeit rough, northern limit of a Lower Southwestern Tai domain.

Since the appearance of the model for the alignment of dialects in Southwestern Tai in Hartmann (1976a), Fang Kuei Li's publication *A Handbook of Comparative Tai* has appeared (1977). Much of the opening part of this volume, which will undoubtedly become a classic in comparative Tai studies, is devoted to the classification of dialects along the lines of tonal splits. It is clear that the divisions made by Li (1977) support the model presented in Hartmann (1976a) and revised slightly in this article, along with an elaboration of the feeding relationship involved in the five steps in the changes that predominate in Southwestern Tai. Li's division of Tai dialects allows us to equate his dialect types I, II, III for the Southwestern Tai group with our labels Upper, Middle and Lower Southwestern Tai, respectively.

Reviewing very briefly, in Li (1977) we find the following dialects representative of type I, or Upper Southwestern Tai:

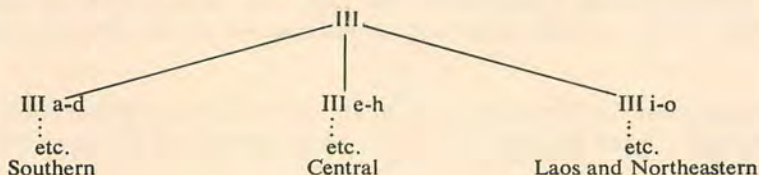
Lue (Li), White Tai (Donaldson), Black Tai (Gedney),
Sam Neua (Simmonds), Tak Bai (Brown #79), Shan (Cushing),
Red Tai (Gedney), Phu Thai (Brown).

For type II, or Middle Southwestern Tai, we find the following in Li (1977):

Chiangmai (Haas, Egerod, etc.), Chiengrai (Brown), Prae (Simmonds, Brown),
Payao (Simmonds), Tak (Simmonds), Khuen (Egerod).

Type III in Li (1977) includes the remaining dialects of Laos and northeast Thailand, and Central Thai and Southern Thai. Li states on page 49:

Dialects showing systems of Type III are found only in Laos and Thailand, and seem to form a subgroup of dialects among the Southwestern group. From the typology of their tonal development, we may arrange the different subtypes in a hierarchical order which perhaps has significance in terms of historical development and geographical distribution.



The tree sketched above is only a rough approximation of the one presented in Li (1977) showing the hierarchical order of dialects in Lower Southwestern Tai. Our approach has been a strictly geographic one. With this in mind, a cartogram of the dialects within Southwestern Tai has been prepared (at end of article).

A few words concerning the major geographical boundaries found in the Southwestern Tai region are appropriate here.

First, the major geographical divide that appears to separate Lower Southwestern Tai from Central and Upper is the foothills that mark the beginning of the uplands where the Chao Phraya Valley (Central Plains) and the Lower Mekong River Valley end.

Next in significance is undoubtedly the Mekong River itself. In the Central Mekong region, Yunnan Province in particular, the River clearly serves as a border between dialects of Shan, Nuea, Khamti on the west and the closely related dialects of Lue, White and Black Tai on the east.

Not to be overlooked is the Khorat Plateau which effectively divides Northeastern and Central Thai.

There are socio-political determinants of subdialects within Southwestern Tai as well. In Laos proper, there are at least three subdialects that focus on the capitals of the north, center and the south.

In this paper, we have reviewed and compared the arguments for the alignment of subdivisions within Southwestern Tai as presented in Hartmann (1976) and Li (1977). It was shown that three major subdivisions of dialects covering distinct and continuous geographical areas can be delimited on the basis of common patterning of the splitting up of the PT tones *A B C. In the model presented in this paper, the three subdialects have been labeled Upper, Middle and Lower Southwestern Tai for areas which are designated by Li (1977) as I, II, III, respectively.

Going a step beyond a taxonomy of subdialects, the groups were viewed as having undergone a series of changes described as a process of feeding relationships. To wit, the dialects of Upper and Middle Southwestern Tai have undergone bipartition, while those of Lower Southwestern Tai have undergone tripartition as part of their separate histories. For the latter, in particular, tripartition was triggered by the final step in the series of changes in the initial stops: *vd > vl > asp. The process is an orderly one where bipartition must precede tripartition.

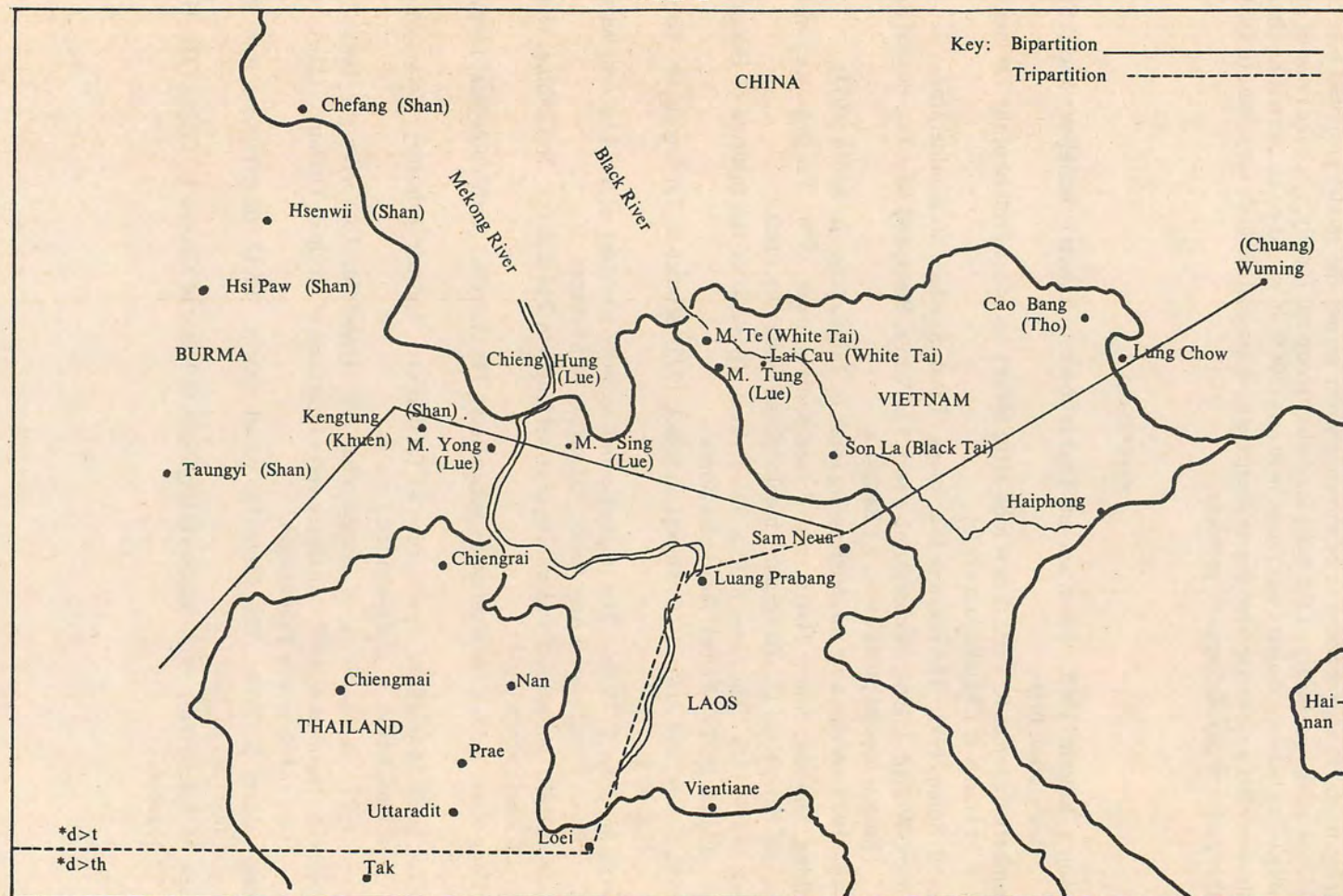
Several implications for future research might be drawn from this exercise in linguistic geography. The same three divisions that apply to Southwestern Tai alone might be shown

later to extend to the whole of the Tai language family, or at least one aspect of its historical development. It also remains to be shown whether or not the model proposed here can be validated using vocabulary as the basis for dialect grouping. Finally, since the issue of mutual intelligibility between dialects was raised in Brown (1965), it would be an interesting challenge to show in what ways and to what degree comparative-historical methods contribute to a solution to this practical psycholinguistic problem.

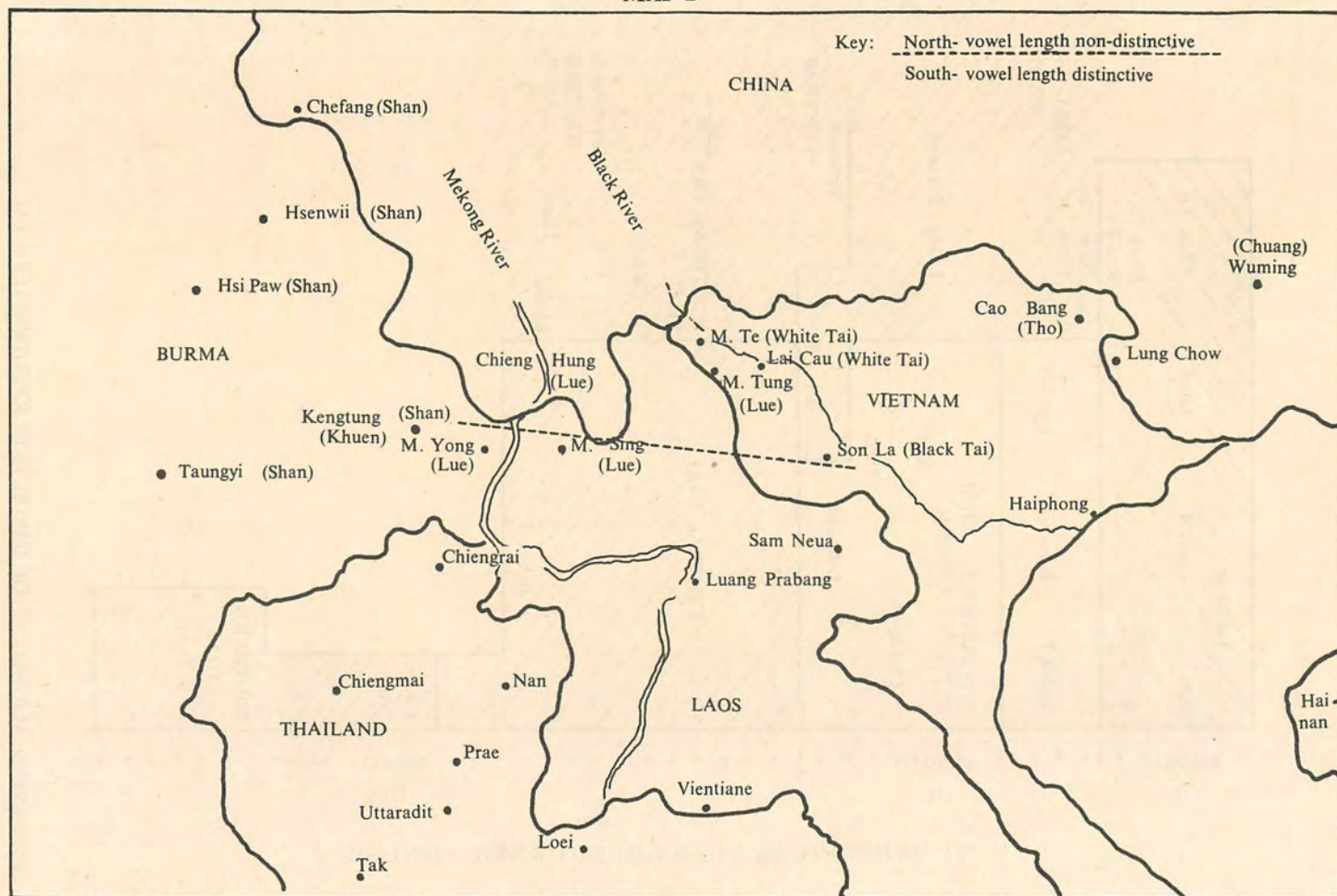
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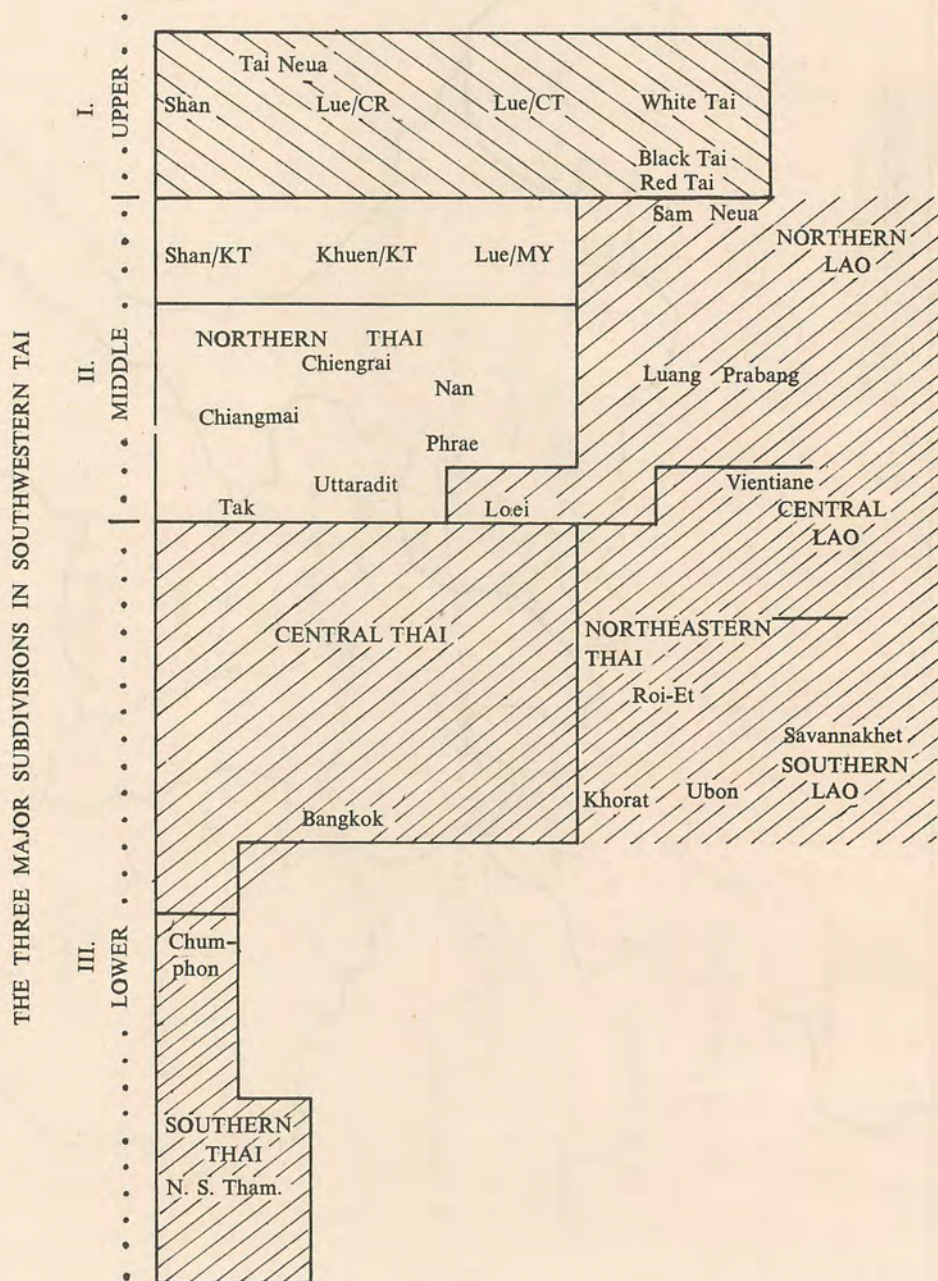
MAP 1



MAP 2



CARTOGRAM



SUGGESTED ALIGNMENT OF DIALECTS IN SOUTHWESTERN TAI