

The Tai Original Diaspora

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Introduction

Some twenty-five years ago, the issue of the deep origins of the Tai was a hot topic of academic debate. Now it has disappeared. The preoccupations of Tai or Thai Studies have significantly changed over time. Here I want to return to a discussion of where the Tai came from and when did they first move out into the world. In a recent article (Evans 2014), I have shown that the Tai did not come from Nan Chao, yet Nan Chao played an important role in their story. Here I will look further at the role of the Tai in the making of Southeast Asia from the perspective of what I have called ‘areal anthropology’, which is an attempt to break out of nationalist conceptions of what, for example, the Lao are. In a review of Wolters (Evans 2002), I used the term ‘culture area.’ The problem with that term is that it has the same problems as the word ‘culture’, only writ large. The problem is boundaries: how do you draw a boundary around a culture? That is a preoccupation of most who talk about cultures. Areal anthropology can be thought of as analogous to area linguistics, which talks about the formation of languages in relation to other languages. Areal anthropology means talking about the formation of a culture in relation to other cultures, not talking about boundaries but about the shared relationships between adjacent groups of people, and the degree to which there are no clear boundaries. It is not possible to say ‘This is Thai culture, this is Lao culture,’ although there are certain elements which are more strongly emphasised in one group as against another. Areal anthropology explores the many shared elements of culture which spread across different ethnic groups, such as the evolution of mythologies.

There is no such thing as an original, pure Tai culture, though the idea of some such thing has been very strong, both in Thailand and Laos.

On the issue of the origins of the Thai or Tai, the historical linguists set the running

¹ Keynote speech at the 12th International Conference on Thai Studies, Sydney, 24 April 2014. Grant Evans died in Vientiane on 16 September 2014. The text of the speech was retrieved from Grant’s computer by Keomany Somvandy and Jim Chamberlain. This text had no introduction. Phil Hirsch provided an audio recording of the speech as delivered in Sydney. The introduction to this article is an edited transcription from this recording. The remainder of the article comes from the written text, with the addition of one short paragraph (the first following the subheading: The Tai diaspora in Vietnamese records) based on the spoken version; the movement of one paragraph; and the deletion of one sentence (for repetition). Grant’s speech in Sydney followed the written text, although greatly condensed, but without the final section on “Everyday Migration.” For help in reconstructing the references and citations, thanks go to Li Tana, Charles Holcombe, Nitnoi Faming, Simon Creak, Jim Chamberlain, Catherine Churchman, Siang Bacthi, Geoff Wade, Michel Lorrillard, Liam Kelley, Pittayawat Pittayaporn, Alexis Michaud, and Michel Ferlus.

during the late 20th century. They argued that the existence of a variety of Tai dialects and languages in Guangxi and Guangzhou provinces, plus the more distantly related Kadai languages, pointed to the Tai homeland. The argument was developed by William Gedney, Li Fang-Kuei, James Chamberlain and others. Gedney postulated the existence of a Proto-Tai language at some time between 1,500 and 2,000 years ago. This may be roughly right. According to plant geneticists, sticky rice, which is an upland variety that has to be actively selected, emerged at around the same period, and the zone where sticky rice is grown coincides closely with the northern settlements of Tai groups, including the Lao.

The early limit of Gedney's estimate lands in the middle of the Han dynasty (206 BCE to 220 CE), while the later limit falls in the Sui dynasty (581-618 CE), just prior to the powerful Tang dynasty from the 7th to 10th centuries CE. This timing contrasts with the theories of W.C. Dodd (1923), Wiens (1954), and other early scholars who claimed that the Tai had occupied all of China, well before the Chinese, and were in Dodd's phrase, the 'elder brother of the Chinese'. Gedney's estimate makes the Tai a rather new people on the world stage.

Gedney noted the great variety of dialects within the region. Tai groups living only forty or fifty kilometres apart in Guangxi province could not communicate directly with each other. When they got together, they spoke Chinese.

The problem with the historical linguists' idea of a proto-language is that they give an impression that such a language actually existed rather than being a theoretical and heuristic concept for understanding what the common characteristics of such a language would be if it was going to evolve in a particular direction.

The linguists' timeframe is reasonably well established, but the emergence of the language itself remains a mystery. At some point in time, it simply emerges. The linguists have almost nothing to say about culture. Gedney says only that the culture in which the Proto-Tai language emerged was not very different from traditional peasant culture as known in the area today.

The Bai-yi was a large region encompassing Guangdong, Guangxi, Guangzhou and perhaps parts of what is now North Vietnam. It was an area of immense ethnic diversity prior to the invasions by the Chin and then the Han dynasty. To the Chinese, it was totally foreign, full of 'barbarians'. Ramsay wrote that it was as ethnically and linguistically diverse as Southeast Asia or Papua New Guinea. The Chinese invasions were ferocious affairs, which probably brought about the total destruction of many smaller groups. With the arrival of the Chinese, the region became a large frontier zone, where a wide range of diglossia, or frontier languages, emerged, usually a pidgin mixing of Middle Chinese with local languages. Both Tai dialects and several Chinese languages emerged out of this situation of contact. Cantonese, for example, emerged under the Tang dynasty through contact with Tai languages, and Hakka emerged out of contact with the Yao, who were also an important group in the zone.

Thus Tai does not emerge in a pristine form, as it appears in the linguists' version, but through a complex interaction between several languages, including Yao, varieties of Chinese, and so on. The soldiers in the Chinese armies were not all speakers of Mandarin (Putonghua). The Chinese deliberately recruited ethnic groups in the path

of their armies. Pidgin languages would have been created for communication within these armies. Several types of Tai would thus have emerged simultaneously in different parts of the region. The cultural and ethnic mixing in this frontier zone was immensely complex.

Early Chinese sources identify groups with terms like Yue, Huang and Nong. These terms sound like Chinese surnames. The Chinese applied these forms of identification from early on. A term like Zhuang emerges only later, during the Song dynasty (960-1279 CE), from a word with a primary meaning of ‘mercenary soldier’. Only since 1949 has the term Zhuang become established as a description of Tai groups in the region. Among the Zhuang, there is still great diversity.

According to Bob Bauer, the first writing of a Tai language appeared around the 7th century using Chinese characters to render Tai words in phonetical form. David Holm (2004) made a detailed analysis of some ritual texts, showing they had already been heavily influenced by Taoism and by a type of Chinese Buddhism. They were already deeply influenced by Chinese civilisation.

Let me now move on to the diaspora, referring to in Figure 1, a map which was created by Chris Baker (2002) based on the work by James Chamberlain. I will concentrate on just one part of the map at the eastern end.

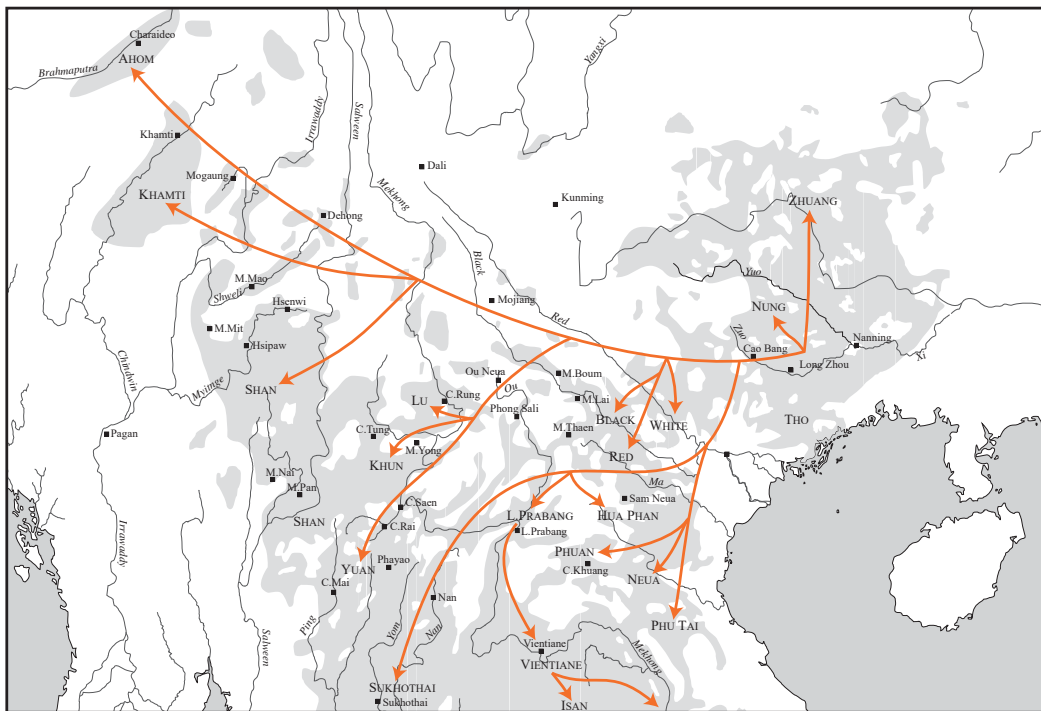


Figure 1. Chamberlain's family tree of the Tai languages overlain on the geography. The grey-shaded areas are currently inhabited by Tai-speakers (Lebar et al., *Ethnic Groups of Mainland Southeast Asia*). The map does not show migration routes, which are unknown. From Baker, "From Yue to Tai," 6.

The take-off point of the Tai diaspora lay in Guangxi province. The movement occurred in three main phases. The first came with the advent of the Tang dynasty in the 7th century, and its attempts to exert stronger control in Guangxi and Guangdong provinces. This led in 756 CE to a massive revolt involving not only many Tai, but

several other groups that were probably obliterated. Some 200,000 combatants came together to reject Chinese domination while instituting everywhere prefects and other functionaries to replace the Chinese organisation. They invaded eighteen *cho* (districts) of Guangxi, marking their passage by burning and taking many captives. This situation went on for several years, propelling the first wave of migration out of the region.

The second phase came with the Nan Chao invasion of northern Vietnam over a decade in the middle of the 9th century. From Dali, the Nan Chao army swept down to around Hanoi, and then westward to occupy Nanning. When the Tang forces then pushed the Nan Chao army back, the area was almost completely depopulated. As I have argued elsewhere (Evans 2014), indigenous Tai people would have been swept up into the Nan Chao armies and, no doubt, many of them were carried back into Nan Chao territory as a result. Communications with their home areas, however, are unlikely to have been completely broken, and such movements of people doubtless thus provided information about what lay beyond their own territory. But more importantly, the Nan Chao provided a protective umbrella vis-a-vis the Chinese that allowed Tai groups something like ‘safe passage’ across the north of mainland Southeast Asia.

The third wave came with the Nong Zhi-gao revolt in the mid-11th century, which I shall describe in more detail.

The Nong Zhi-gao revolt

The Qin and the Han expansion into the south wiped out many local communities physically or forced them to move, while others were engulfed and then gradually Sinicised. Giao-chi, the commandery established by the Han on the Red River Delta coast, became a flourishing entrepot for international trade and for trade in rice to Guangzhou. Indeed, until the end of the Han dynasty it boasted a higher population than the latter. However, Guangzhou would eclipse Giao-chi as the empire’s main foreign trade port after that. Northern settlers streamed into both regions.

Much of the early contact between Guangzhou and Giao-chi was by sea because the overland route was difficult and obstructed by aggressive ‘Li’ and ‘Lao’ barbarians. Michael Churchman chooses to see these people as ‘Tai-Kadai’, but while it is clear that the Tai peoples (who were in the process of formation in this Han period) were numerous, there were also many other groups as well. As Holcombe (1997-98: 144) observes, “In the fifth century ‘many kinds’ of Li 里 and Liao [Lao] 獠 tribes occupied the mountains of Guangzhou. The Li people lived scattered in independent villages in the mountains through wide regions of Guangdong and Guangxi,” there were the ‘cannibalistic Wuhu 烏滸’ and “the ‘wild Wenlang’ 文郎野人 who slept in the forest without permanent homes, ate raw meat, and gathered incense for trade.” Ten thousand Wuhu reportedly surrendered to the imperial forces in 170 CE, but “Eight years later... Wuhu from Jiaozhi [Giao-chi] and Hepu commanderies sparked a four year rebellion involving tens of thousands of people in all of the commanderies to their south and west.” And there is an endless stream of reports about the intransigence of various communities, where households numbering in the tens of thousands refused to ‘submit’ (Churchman, 2011: 71-2).

However, the geography of Guangxi was formidable, with mountains covering some 75 per cent of the province, while less than 15 per cent were plains dotted with spectacular karst formations. The many rivers provided transport, but the main arteries ran from the north-west to the south-east. Only along the coast was the land relatively flat, and here the Chinese gathered first. The mainland route went through the ‘Ghost Gate Pass’ until Tang times, and it was a route that left the hinterland of Guangxi relatively untouched and where the Han imperial presence was characterised by isolated fortified strongholds. “The keys to Lingnan were the twin cities at Guangzhou and Jiaozhi [Giao-chi] (Jiaozhou). In-between these two urban strongholds lay large stretches of wilderness, especially in what are now Guangxi and southern Guangdong provinces, inhabited by only partially assimilated tribesmen” (Holcombe, 1997-98: 148). This situation remained as dynasties rose and fell after the fall of the Han Dynasty, but with the rise of the Tang dynasty “a vigorous initial effort was made to incorporate native tribal groups into Chinese-style urban-centred prefectures. In 638, along the western frontier of Lingnan and the approaches to modern Vietnam, 3,667 households of Man people were organized into Longzhou, 1,666 households of Yi and Liao people were organized into Rangzhou, and unspecified number of Man people into Huanzhou, and 285 households of Yi and Liao into Guzhou. Tianzhou was established out of so-called grotto-Man tribes in the early eighth century, and Yanzhou from the Liao in 677” (Holcombe 1997-98: 147). These attempts by the Tang to press the local peoples into the imperial regime disrupted local power bases as well as social and economic activities, and consequently were resisted and resented.

While it is highly probable that the indigenous political systems were prone to warring among themselves, the arrival of the Chinese added a new and, probably at first, unfathomable element to this warfare. Moreover, their presence sometimes allowed indigenous forces to use them in their battles with rivals. Thus, the ‘Hoang tribe’, which had been growing in strength in the mid-6th century, attacked the ‘tribes’ of the Wei, Chou and Nong, ‘driving them to the sea-shore’ (Ma, 1883: 237). This was followed by uprisings of the ‘chiefs of the Si-Youen-Man’ (Si-Youen being an older name for Guangxi) across the region in 756 C.E. “These kings coalesced, bringing together forces of 200,000 combatants, to reject Chinese domination, while instituting everywhere prefects and other functionaries to replace the Chinese organization. They invaded 18 *chou* 州 [districts] of the government of Guangxi, marking their passage by burning and taking with them numerous captives. This situation went on for four years until it could be remedied” (Ma, 1883: 238), partly by inducing some of the rebels to join the Chinese forces. However, rebellions on different scales continued and the Tang instituted the *jimi* system, which recognised the local authority of some chieftains and thereby incorporated them into the imperial system, as a way of trying to control these frontier regions. There is at least one report of the ‘Nong tribe’ attempting to gain support from the Nan Chao kingdom of Yunnan in the mid-9th century in their struggles with the Chinese, but the Emperor himself was able to make an alliance with the Nan Chao, and so, “This politics of opposing one rival tribe against another bore fruit” (Ma, 1883: 245).

But the relationship with the kingdom of Nan Chao itself was fragile and in 861, with the support of upland indigenous leaders, many of them probably Tai, Nan Chao

attacked the Chinese protectorate of Annam, capturing Hanoi and then withdrawing. It was the first of several attacks, with the one in 863 appearing to have the aim of permanent occupation. In 861, they also struck at Yung-chou (Nanning) in Guangxi, and when the Tang forces arrived after their withdrawal, “they found the region to have been desolated, with only a small fraction of its inhabitants still there” (Backus, 1981: 152). This region was attacked several times by the Nan Chao and its local allies up until 864 when a major Tang campaign against them began, and finally succeeded in expelling the Nan Chao soldiers in late 866. The consequences for the indigenous people, who had helped their campaign, are enumerated in the *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư* (1990: 16): “the indigenous people who had shown the way for the Nan Chao troops, more than 30,000 were decapitated... the two indigenous territories that sided with the Nan Chao were razed and their chiefs executed.” No doubt these reprisals were directed against many people who were Tai.

As the Tang dynasty went into decline, imperial power, naturally, waned on its periphery, and during the so-called ‘Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms’ period (907-60) in the Nan Yue, various leaders saw an opportunity to claim power for themselves – most significantly and successfully in Vietnam.

In the watershed of the Left River, which flowed towards Nanning from the frontier region above Cao Bang in Vietnam, were many settlements of Tai peoples called Nong 儂人 by the Chinese. Tai leaders in this region, which overlapped into the modern province of Yunnan had, according to some sources, received titles from the Nan Chao / Dali kingdom and so, when officials from the ascendant Song Dynasty (960-1279) entered the region, they found chiefs whose status had already been bolstered by outside connections (Anderson, 2007: 75). Furthermore, within the imperial system it was a region that was in the bailiwick of Giao-chi, and at that time the Vietnamese court was asserting its status outside the inner realms of this system. In these frontier regions, chiefs could often look both ways, towards the Song and towards the Vietnamese. The Song recognised the Tai leader of this region, Nong Dan Phu, as having *neifu* status, i.e., protection of the empire under a Chinese military commander, and he passed this status onto his son, Nong Quan-fu, who became a powerful figure partly through his control of the trade in alluvial gold from the region. His power grew and he expanded the territory under his control, apparently by killing other local chiefs who were his kin. He “proclaimed himself emperor Chiêu-thanh, and gave the title of empress to [his wife] A Nùng, and named his son Trí Thông prince Nam Nha, transformed the district into a kingdom Truong-Sinh, made military preparations, built forts for protection, and ceased to offer the tribute of a vassal” (Nguyen, 1990: 23). The Vietnamese court quickly cut his ambitions short, sending an expeditionary force to crush this rebellion. “The rebels were brought in cages to the capital. The fortifications made by them destroyed, and the survivors of the tribe brought together and pacified” (Nguyen, 1990: 23). Nong Quan-fu, many of his family and officers were executed.

His wife, A Nong, however, escaped with their young son, Nong Zhi-gao, who would go on to lead the largest Tai-led rebellion in the southern region. His mother remarried a rich merchant, who Zhi-gao killed as a young man, allegedly declaring that one “can have only one father”. This, perhaps apocryphal story, marked Zhi-gao as

exceptional, but in contradictory ways: firstly, it demonstrated filial piety, but secondly, it also demonstrated the opposite – and indeed, some Chinese sources claim the merchant was his father (Ma, 1883: 247). It is the stuff of which legends are made. Yet, it is true that A-Nong went on to marry her third husband, a Tai chief in the prefecture of Temo, near the current Yunnan border. It was from here, on the margins of imperial power, that Zhi-gao later rose up several times, most spectacularly in 1052 when his snowballing army of recruits from across Guangxi and Guangdong reached the outskirts of Guangzhou and laid siege to it. After his first major victory at Nanning, he declared the founding of the Great Southern Kingdom, granted himself the title of Benevolent and Kind Emperor, while his mother took the title ‘empress dowager’, and he called for a realm that was unconstrained by tributary ties.

Until this time he had tried to negotiate a place in the Song *jimi* system, but was rebuffed by the Song, who were wary of usurping the prerogatives within the imperial system of the already assertive Vietnamese, who had made it clear that they would not tolerate too much chiefly autonomy on their frontier. Perhaps the Nan Chao/Dali kingdom suggested one kind of autonomous kingdom to Zhi-gao, and apparently even Chao T’o’s *Nan Yue* was an inspiration in 1052. But in the substantial literature on the Nong Zhi-gao rebellion, no one has pointed to what seems to be a millennial strain in his campaign. It began, reportedly, with Zhi-gao ordering his followers to burn their villages: “Heaven has destroyed all that you have here. Its will is manifest and we will become masters of the countries of Yong [Guangxi] and of Kuang [Guangdong]. Each one of us should therefore take up arms in combat, and to the death if necessary” (Ma, 1883: 250). Apparently, the movement of his troops in rags caused the Chinese to ignore the threat. The establishment of a new kingdom, *Ta-nan* (Great South), and the decree that the years of his reign would be called *ki-li*, i.e. the opening of a new calendar, all suggest the arrival of a new kingdom on earth – perhaps not unlike what the region would see with the Taiping rebellion hundreds of years later. One might suggest that this millennial strain that ran through the rebellion produced the synergy for this mighty outburst of energy. Anderson (2007: 101), however, considers Zhi-gao’s speech “more of a literary device” of the Chinese chroniclers “than a statement of historical fact”, but this leaves him struggling for an answer as to why Zhi-gao chose to rebel.

Studies of millenarianism have pointed out that it flourishes in times of social and cultural dislocation, which was certainly the case in Guangxi in the 11th century. Under the Tang, the state had sought to tighten its control over local societies through the *jimi* system which, unsurprisingly, benefited some groups more than others. Moreover, Chinese migration south was continuous, if temporarily uneven, and each military campaign against rebels, at their completion, left behind military colonies, all of which disturbed local societies. “Although there seem to be no estimates for the Zhuang-Han population ratio in the Song, in the Tang it was thought that seventy per cent of the local people were ‘barbarian’ and thirty per cent Han” (Barlow, 1987: 258). The political vacuum, opened up by the decline of the Tang, allowed the rise of leaders promising a new beginning, and added to the sense of time being out of joint. The opening for change, which Vietnam grasped, soon closed however.

The collapse of the Tang sent a flood of refugees into the south. As Ramsay (1997: 33) carefully observes:

Among these immigrants were elite families who were protected by well-organized armies and followed by dispossessed peasants. Such groups formed the social and administrative core of the kingdoms that were subsequently established in the South, and these Sinitic kingdoms in turn provided the base for the complete assimilation of the South into Inner China when China was reunified by the Song.

It was in the face of a tide of northern immigrants that Zhi-gao attempted to carve a new kingdom out of Song territory, and the latter soon mobilised its army to crush the attempt, and Zhi-gao himself would finally flee to Dali where his demise remains obscure.

But it is interesting to ponder the reasons for the success of the Vietnamese in establishing an independent kingdom at this time, compared with Zhi-gao's ill-fated rebellion. A substantial number of the elite families in Giao-chi were Chinese immigrants, who spoke a language which could be called Annamese Middle Chinese, and who were well-versed in Chinese statecraft. By the 10th century, however, they were increasingly isolated from intercourse with the north and thus "began a process of merging with and shifting into the prestige version of Proto-Viet-Muong, a process that produced what we can recognize as the Vietnamese language" (Taylor, 2013: 50). By contrast, Zhi-gao and his followers were only familiar with the Chinese imperial system through the institution of the *jimi*, and even though his proclamations mimicked a Chinese model, it seems clear that they still had little grasp of how to create a state for themselves. Indeed, it is even unclear what the *lingua franca* of this movement may have been. While the majority of his followers were Tai, it is not at all obvious that they therefore communicated mainly in Tai given the relative newness of this language family, and furthermore, like most armies, it would have been multi-ethnic. The Yao, for instance, were a significant part of the population. So, communication may have been mainly in Pinghua, for instance. The Chinese sources, unfortunately, are completely silent on such matters.

Of course, the rebellion caused tremendous disruption and loss of life, not least as a result of Chinese reprisals. The 13th century chronicler, Fan Chi Hou, noted:

The old family of the Hoang are still numerous. That of the Nong, to the contrary, have almost disappeared. This happened after the pacification of the troubles caused by Nong Zhi-gao, and the family Nong having shown their fidelity to the emperor were authorised to take the name of the family of the reigning dynasty. There are still a small number of indigenous people in the country who have conserved the name Nong, but many more are now called Zhao [the emperor's family name] (cited in Ma, 1883: 261-2).

Obviously, many people known as Nong took flight, along with many others either involved in the rebellion, or who were fleeing it and its aftermath.

The Tai diaspora

The Tai who migrated into mainland Southeast Asia were speakers of what linguists call South-western Tai. Geddes is inclined to include Central Tai with South-western Tai, leaving northern Tai as a distinct dialect, including what is known today as northern Zhuang, Buyi, and others. Linguists have suggested that the main features of this dialect were in place before the migrations began, and that the spread of these Tai across the northern boundary of mainland Southeast Asia, and down its valleys and rivers to the south occurred rapidly, within the space of a few hundred years, thereby ensuring that the differentiations within this dialect would not be so great as to inhibit communication.

We have already noted what appears to be resistance to early Tang expansion in areas that would have been mainly Tai, and perhaps it was then that large groups or even whole villages began to trek away from the Chinese frontier. There had been, of course, deep historical contacts between Guangxi and northern Vietnam with the interior of Yunnan. The Dian kingdom, situated just south of modern Kunming in the period from the 4th to the 1st century B.C. “appears to have been... in contact with the contemporary cultures of southern China (Yue) and of North Vietnam (Dông-son). It is probable that the states of Yunnan, of southern China and of north Indochina constituted, at the end of the 1st millennium before our era, a kind of cultural confederation, in the interior of which were all kinds of influences” (Pirazzoli-t’Serstevens, 1974: 1-2). Dian was not Tai, as some have speculated, but associated with Tibeto-Burman peoples. Nevertheless, it is perhaps from here that the knowledge of bronze drum making spread across the region and was adopted by many different groups, including the precursors of the Tai. They remained important symbols of power among the indigenous groups, and among the Li and the Lao, or the Lilao, up into Tang times whose sources speak of them as “placing great value on bronze drums” that are “found everywhere throughout the twenty-five commanderies” of Lingnan (Holm, 2003: 165; also Churchman, 2011: 74-79).

We are not dealing with totally isolated communities but, in fact, a regional system. Indeed, northern Indochina-Guangxi can be considered the terminus point of the southern Silk Road that ran through Dali, and merchants followed the Red River that began in Yunnan down to the south-west. Goods and ideas from the Southern Silk Road travelled north-east through Dali into central China, but no doubt some also travelled down the Red River route. We are not talking about large numbers of people or major caravans of goods on the move. The terrain was difficult – as French engineers discovered when they built a train route from Hanoi to Kunming paralleling the Red River in the 19th century – yet one can imagine an adventurous, solitary Tai person making their way as far as India at this time, although it is unlikely.

There is no ‘exodus’ narrative to be found among the Tai. Only in the late 19th century was such a narrative concocted by Europeans, one that claimed the Thai/Lao people had fled south from the kingdom of Nan Chao in north-western Yunnan to populate the lands of modern Thailand and Laos. This narrative was adopted and propagated by Thai historians and educators, and by the Lao too. It still has currency in Laos, but less so in Thailand. However, research has shown that the Kingdom of Nan Chao was not Tai (Evans 2014).

Instead, what one finds among the ‘tribal’ Tai and the Lao are legends of the creation of humans by Gods, and the foundation of chiefdoms or kingdoms by their descendants. The adoption of Buddhism by Tai groups saw such stories reconfigured by Buddhist narratives. The creation of Buddhist kingdoms by the Tai opened up a cultural gap between them and the non-Buddhist Tai in Vietnam and southern China.

The people called Tho and Nung along the Vietnamese border with China are cultural extensions of the southern Zhuang in Guangxi, and were largely contained to their south by the Vietnamese. However, in the mountains further to the west, the Red River, the Black River and the Ma River were like highways for the Tai into the highlands that lie between Vietnam and Laos, and they were clearly once the initial routes out of Guangxi and south-eastern Yunnan. These rivers are usually cited at the beginning of the important Black Tai legend, the *Khwaam To Muang*, where a region encompassing nine rivers is referred to:

Heaven had the form of a large mushroom made of seven pieces of land, three blocks of stone, and nine rivers among which were the Nam Tao (Red River), the Nam-U and the Nam Khong (Mekong). (Roux and Tran 1935: 1041).

The details of each legend, however, are different even though they have been written down, thus stabilising the tale somewhat. For example, a version of the *Khwaam To Muang* which survives among Black Tai, who migrated to north-eastern Thailand and are known as Tai Song, runs:

Recall, in ancient times there was earth and grass,
 In ancient times the sky was like a mushroom,
 In ancient times there were seven mountains,
 In ancient times there was bore water,
 In ancient times there were three stone columns,
 In ancient times there were nine rivers,
 In ancient times there was the mouth of the Black River, the Red River, the U River
 and the Mekong River. (Thawi 2010: 44-5).

And it goes on to speak about how the earth in the beginning was empty. This version, edited by Thawi Swangpanyangkoon, is similar to a version produced in Iowa by Black Tai refugees (Tai Studies Center 1999). A composite version of the *Khwaam To Muang* has been produced by Vietnamese scholars (Đặng Nghiễm V̄an et al., 1977), and Jim Chamberlain (1992) has produced an annotated version from Muang Mouay in Vietnam.

But by the very nature of the society that produced these texts there can be no definitive version. The Vietnamese version, while very useful, reflects the mindset of a modern national state setting out to establish a ‘national literature’, with accredited versions of various texts.² A centralised state can try to do this, but there was never

² Jim Chamberlain dismisses the usefulness of this redaction: “The main weakness is that everything

any Black Tai state or Black Tai ‘Ministry of Culture’ that could do this. The versions varied according to the particular conditions of the local Tai societies in which they were embedded. It is worth noting that none of them would have been written down before the 16th century, after which there was a Tai script shared (mostly) among the White, Black and Red Tai (Maspero 1911: 157; see also Ferlus 2006a). Ferlus notes that the manuscripts were written on ‘Chinese paper’: “These manuscripts were never very old, no more than one or two centuries. They deteriorated due to use and had to be re-copied periodically... [however] modifications could be introduced through re-copying. The knowledge of writing was transmitted only in the families of the notables, there was no schooling, and therefore no norms” (Ferlus 2006a: 219).

Charles Archaimbault writes about the problems associated with the chronicles of Muang Phuan, a small kingdom formed by Tai migrants in Xieng Khwang and which retained much in common with their non-Buddhist fellows further east. The Lao annals, he said, were an “incoherent mélange of miscellaneous bits and pieces. More than the other annals, those of Muang P’uon [Phuan] present to the historian such problems” (1967: 558). This, as he writes, was a product of wars that have swept across the region, and the attitude towards history of those who wrote them. He goes on: “The annals of Muang P’uon that retrace the history of the muang since its origins up to the establishment of the French protectorate contain in fact, like all the Lao annals, very little historical material and when they refer to events prior to the 19th century whose existence is corroborated by the Vietnamese or Siamese annals, they are not situated in time at all” (Archaimbault 1967: 559). The annals, he concludes, are really only useful for studying the ‘religious structures’ of Xieng Khwang. This critical assessment of annals that were overseen by a state with a literate religious tradition, suggests even greater wariness when assessing the historical value of, say, the *Khwaam To Muang*.

The Tai diaspora in Vietnamese records

Another major source on the movement of the Tai is the Vietnamese annals, including the *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư*, the history of the Great Viet, compiled in the 13th century and updated in the 15th century.

Because Tai are not explicitly referred to in the early Vietnamese records we can only infer, primarily from the location, that Tai peoples must have been involved in revolts or other events set down in the annals. It would be inaccurate to infer that all the upland revolts recorded in the *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư* are exclusively Tai. The mountains were also inhabited by Austroasiatic groups and perhaps even some Yao, but ethnonyms that would be recognisable today are few and far between. But part of what we are witnessing in these reports are the initial forays by the newly established Viet

is translated into Vietnamese with absolutely none of the original Tai language included. This renders the text useless for linguistic, etymological, philological, and literary purposes, and eliminates any potential value as a primary historical source” (1992: 21). I do not agree with this latter argument because comparison of the Vietnamese texts with other texts allows one to note interesting similarities and differences that may bear on historical events. Also, the Vietnamese text does include the alternate versions in footnotes for purposes of comparison.

state into areas it was attempting to lay claim to, and predictably, it met with resistance. In the introduction to *Le Đại Việt et ses Voisins*, Nguyen The Anh (1990: iii) notes that from the 11th century onwards, the frontiers were considered to be ordained by heaven and their maintenance thus bolstered authority: “The task of sovereigns was therefore to assure their defense as way of legitimizing his authority. This resulted in a vision of obsessive fear of the attraction that could be exercised by other centers of power on the populations in peripheral regions: from this came the need to attack rival powers in order to conserve control of one’s own sphere of influence.”

The reports we find in the *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư* are usually cryptic. Thus, one of the earliest reports from the first decade of the 11th century is of Vietnamese attempts to repress rebels, called ‘Cu-long’, in the old Han-created district of Ai in today’s Thanh-hoa province. The editors identify this as a Muong area, but it was probably also Tai. The royal army, it reports, “crushed them completely, after having put them through fire and blood and captured their chiefs” (Nguyen 1990: 20). In 1013, there was a revolt in the north-west, today’s province of Tai Nguyen, by people, probably Tai, who still supported links with the Nan Chao. They were repressed and their leader “sought refuge with his partisans in the mountain massifs” (Nguyen 1990: 20). In 1014, some 200,000 *Man*³ crossed what the Vietnamese regarded as their frontier on the Chinese border between Lai Chao and Cao Bang, possibly a foray by Nung. “The invaders were killed in thousands and from whom an innumerable quantity of men and horses were captured” (Nguyen 1990: 21). In the interest of maintaining good relations with the Song Dynasty, a hundred of the captured horses were offered to them.

The minorities on the border between the Vietnamese and Chinese were, unsurprisingly, under pressure from both sides. The new Vietnamese state demonstrated that it had already learned some lessons from the Tang *jimi* policy as it is reported that the new Ly dynasty in 1029 offered a princess in marriage to the indigenous chief of Lang-son, who was probably of a Tai group later known as Tho. Several years later, in 1036, another princess was also given by the emperor to the indigenous chief of an old district, Phong, also substantially Tai, but it could equally have been someone from the Muong group. Later that same year, there is a report of ‘rebels’ in the area between Son-la and Lai-chao, which we can be certain were Tai, “who stole animals and burned down houses” (1990: 23). An army was sent to ‘pacify’ them.

From 1039 on, the *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư* is pre-occupied with the Nung Zhi-gao rebellion that we have already discussed above, a rebellion that epitomised the ambiguous position of the Tai sandwiched between the powerful Song imperial state and the emerging Vietnamese state. Nestled in amongst this discussion is the first reference to a campaign against the ‘Ai-lao’. This category, that has caused considerable confusion in debates over the origin of the Tai (see Evans 2014), was lifted from the *Han Shu* by the Vietnamese and used as a general designation for many groups they found on their western and north-western borders. Needless to say, the ‘Ai-lao’ were ‘pacified’, “and a considerable number of prisoners and animals were taken” (Nguyen 1990: 27). In spring 1069, the “countries of Nguu-hồng and of Ai-lao offered gold,

³ Here the Chinese term for ‘barbarian’ is used.

silver, sandalwood, rhinoceros horns, and ivory tusks as well as local products to the emperor” (Nguyen 1990: 29), a first indication of the establishment of tributary relations with these groups. They are not seen in the annals again for one hundred years when, in 1154, they are both in revolt, but were crushed by Vietnamese forces who brought back prisoners, gold, elephants, and so on.

The *Nguru-hống* that appear in the Viet annals probably should be called *Ngu Hau*, the Tai term for the cobra snake. Indeed, the version of the *Khwaam To Muang* by Roux and Chu (1935: 1046) refers to ‘Pu-Chao-Ngu-Hao’, the cobra prince. The Vietnamese version concurs (Đặng Nghiêm Vạn et al., 1977: unknown), but oversteps the evidence when it suggests that cobra was the ancient name for the Black Tai. As we have seen elsewhere, there seems to be some confusion between the name of a group and an individual because the ‘cobra prince’, whose Tai name was *Lo Let*, lived two centuries later in the 14th century. This is the first mention of the *Nguru-hống* (*Ngu Hao*), and so one could perhaps best render his name as prince of the cobras (cobra people) who lived high up the Black River.⁴ Their Ai-lao allies could have been any other Tai group because, at least in the 11th century, there were still no Lao kingdoms to the west. This had changed, however, by the time that *Lo Let*, or *Pu-Chao-Ngu-Hao*, became the chief of *Muang Muôi* and found himself collecting taxes for “a country called *Sông-Mat-Tat-Te*, but this displeased the King of the Country [Vietnam] which sent an expedition against him and dismissed him from command of the *Muang*. This decision caused *Pu-Chao-Ngu-Hao* to lose face and brought fear and shame. He went to demand protection from *Fa-Fung-Kam* at *Chieng-Lung Chieng-Tong* [Luang Phrabang]. *Fa-Fung-Kam* then gave *Pu-Chao-Ngu-Hao* the country of *Chieng-Ten*” (Roux and Chu 1935: 1047). The Vietnamese version is more specific:

The noble *Ngu Hau* stayed with *Pha Chao Phong Cam* [Souvanna Khamphong] in Laos for six years. Homesick for his country, he asked the *Pha Chao* to intervene with the *Kinh* [Vietnamese] to allow him to become once again the lord of *Muang Muoi*. The king agreed. After returning to his country he engaged in re-organising his villages and districts with counsellors, *xen*, *pong*, *mo* and *nghe*. (Đặng Nghiêm Vạn et al., 1977: unknown)

This occurred under the early Lê Dynasty (1424-1788).⁵ The Vietnamese edition of the *Khwaam To Muang* notes that this region was already strongly attached to the Court under the *Tran* (1225-1400), and adds: “Under the Lê this attachment was much more precise. The lords of Tai territories came to be installed by the Court, paid tribute, rendered other services and provided troops in times of war. For their part the Court provided them with military protection in case of aggression from outside” (Đặng Nghiêm Vạn et al., 1977: unknown). The main point of all this is that by this time, not only have the Vietnamese established tributary relations in the highlands among the

⁴ *Lo Let*, according to the *Khwaam To Muang*, “invented writing and taught it to the people” (Đặng Nghiêm Vạn et al., 1977: unknown), but as we have seen this does not accord with any other evidence. It is possible that he introduced Lao writing, out of which Tai writing developed.

⁵ There was a brief six-year interruption of the *Mạc* Dynasty ‘usurpers’ (1527-1533).

Tai, but the new Lao kingdom in Luang Phrabang had also become an active player in upland Tai politics.

Revolts and skirmishes continued over the centuries, not least due to the instability of the both the lowland and highland political systems. It also becomes clear that the term ‘Ai-lao’ in the annals sometimes refers to Tai groups in the mountains, and sometimes to the kingdoms in Laos. It is interesting, therefore, that the Phuan kingdom is not mentioned until the 15th century in the *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư*, known there as Muang Bôn. So, in 1434 “Muang Bôn of Ai-lao sent a delegation to offer local produce. In exchange the emperor offered two gold embroidered robes and rolls of silk” (1990: 68). This emergence of Muang Phuan out of the mists of ‘Ai-lao’ would appear to register its establishment as a substantial political entity above that of a chiefdom, although the chronicles narrate a much more ancient pedigree.

Not surprisingly the establishment of ‘Muang Xieng Khwang’ is part of the foundational Khun Bulom legend whereby the children of this god-king, *Thene*, are the founders of the various kingdoms in the region: Luang Phrabang, Xieng Khwang, Vietnam, Chiang Mai, Siam, the Mon and China. The first child, Khun Lo, established his kingdom in Luang Phrabang, the second child, Chet Chuang, in Xieng Khwang and, according to the Xieng Khwang annals, this occurred in the 6th century. This legend, however, was first written down during the reign of King Visun (r.1501-1520) of Luang Phrabang, and was modified and spun into many versions. As Archaimbault has pointed out above, annals like this are not historical texts, and Michel Lorrillard has shown, even for historical figures like King Fa Ngum (r.1352-1373), the founder of the Lan Xang Kingdom, much is unverifiable. Lorrillard (2006: 391) points out that none of the information in the Lao documents of the 14th century and the first seventy-five years of the 15th century can be cross-checked by other sources, except for the existence of Fa Ngum, who is recorded on a Sukhothai stele as a lord from across the Mekong, and his son, Sam Saen Thai, who may be mentioned in Chinese sources. There are, however, no other corroborating sources from Cambodia, Ayutthaya, Vietnam or Lan Na.

Before the ascendance of Fa Ngum, Luang Phrabang, or Muang Swa as it was known, was probably little more than a chiefdom. His establishment of the Lan Xang kingdom and his military aggrandisement were impressive. But it was really only with him that Luang Phrabang began its transformation into a Buddhist kingdom. Its cultural roots still seemed to lay closer to the upland Tai than to the other recently formed Buddhist kingdoms of Lan Na and Sukhothai. This is most apparent in the centrality of ritual sacrifices made to the territorial spirits of *muang* Lan Xang, the *phi muang*, in which the *phi* and *chao* of subordinate *muang* would gather in the capital for grand sacrifices. This was even more so for the chiefdom that had been established on the upland plains in Xieng Khwang. The latter began its transformation into a small Buddhist kingdom with the establishment of Lan Xang, and the kings of Luang Phrabang were the ‘kingmakers’ there. Chao Lan Kham Khong, who was enthroned in 1372, according to the annals:

implanted the Buddhism of Hongsawadi [Burma] which was considered the most pure and he imported a precious bronze representation of the Buddha seated in Indian style as an object of veneration. He sent people to study Buddhism in

Cambodia to reinforce the religion's foundations. Large temples and stupas were constructed in several points in the territory. Since then, Buddhism has flourished. Achan Thammakhatha, expert in magical treatises, came from Luang Phrabang to help Chao Lan Kham Khong to build temples and stupas, to establish statues of the Buddha and to work for the country. He erected twelve altars for the protective spirits and established the annual buffalo sacrifice, a custom that continues up to our days (Archambault 1967: 570).

Asked by her son, Chao Kham Khong, whether Luang Phrabang was 'civilised', his mother replied: "This muang is very civilised and its inhabitants cultivate merit. Our territory of Muang P'uon is ignorant of the sacred texts, the law; it is not at all civilised" (Archambault 1967: 607).

The Phuan state could only have been small. Estimates of its population in the early 19th century put it roughly at 40,000⁶ (before the depredations later in the century), but despite the latter it was probably roughly the same or smaller 400 years earlier. It was an important force with which to be reckoned in the mountains, but not regionally, where it fluctuated as a vassal of either Luang Phrabang or Vietnam. Indeed, in 1448, the Vietnamese declared it to be Quy-hôp district of Nghệ-an province. Such declarations, however, reflected Vietnam's own imperial fantasies. Regalia and symbols of rule, for example, were distributed to the 'chiefs' of Muang Phuan:

The indigenous chief of Quy-hôp district, Kham Khong, was given the title of grand general organizer of the far regions. His main assistant secretary Trính Dao was to wear a red coat embroidered with flowers of gold as insignia, and a large hat, and a belt decorated with silver, a saddle and a writing desk (1990: 77).

Yet the realities of power and influence fluctuated. In the late 15th century, the Vietnamese, partly in revenge for Lan Xang's support of the Ming invasion of Vietnam earlier in the century, launched a massive campaign across northern mainland Southeast Asia. Sun Laichen (2006: 102), who has documented Vietnam's acquisition and use of firearms at this time, writes:

In the fall of 1479 Đại Việt, with a force of 180,000 according to Vietnamese sources, launched more fierce invasions into Ai-lao, Muang Phuan, Lan Sang, and further west. Of these Lan Sang was subdued easily.

They threatened the other Tai kingdoms, and reportedly reached as far as the Irrawaddy River in the Ava kingdom. It was a five-year campaign that made it clear to all concerned that Vietnam was a major force with which to be reckoned. Sun Laichen

⁶ The estimate is taken from Smuckarn and Breazeale (1988: 3). Later in the century a census put the population of the Phuan state at 24,920, following war and deportations by the Siamese. But, as they point out, some thirty per cent of these were Hmong, and these people were not in Xieng Khwang when the Phuan kingdom was first established, although the 14.3 percent of 'other hilltribes' may have been much larger back then.

is mainly interested in the impact of guns on warfare, but one should also note that this campaign would have had a great impact on the upland Tai, many of whom would have been swept into the Vietnamese army as either soldiers or porters and carried across the region. I have previously made the point with regard to the Nan Chao invasions of northern Vietnam that many Tai would have been drawn into the Nan Chao armies and, besides learning warfare from them, would have begun their exploration of greener pastures further west. No doubt this Vietnamese campaign (like the Nan Chao war) was instrumental in compelling many Tai (such as those later called Phu Tai) to move further south along and over the cordillera to cross the banks of the Mekong into north-eastern Thailand.

The foundation of a 'Lao' kingdom in the Luang Phrabang area is, as Martin Stuart-Fox writes, "shrouded in mystery and myth.... Nor do we know when the first *mandala* was established in the region of Luang Phrabang" (1997: 7). Tatsuo Hoshino says that the 'most ancient date for a Lao monarch according to all the chronicles is 1271-2" (1986: 92), but these chronicles, as we have noted already, are problematic. Fa Ngum is the first Lao king whose reign can be established with some certainty, but even so the whole story that surrounds him in the chronicles conforms, as Hoshino (1986: 97) remarks, to a legendary pattern:

One comes to see in these Tai traditions several points in common: the transgression or violation of sexual rules committed by a member of the royal family; his expulsion from the country by means of a river, a mother who speaks against the chastisement; being accompanied by a close relative and retainers; the protection or favour given to the exiled and future founder [of a kingdom] by the king of big power who gives him his daughter in marriage as well as title to the kingdom.

That the Lao dispossessed a prior Austroasiatic chiefdom (some may say kingdom) has been recognised in the royal rituals of Luang Phrabang for hundreds of years. Just how they were displaced is less clear. That such groups were often displaced by clear military aggression is well attested, but this is not discussed in the Luang Phrabang annals. Perhaps it was a process whereby Tai groups gradually settled within the confines of Muang Swa, began to participate in its society and its politics until such time as they carried out a coup d'état. Or, was Fa Ngum's march on Muang Swa with his upland Tai reinforcements⁷ the final military coup de grâce delivered to the Austroasiatic rulers who were then expelled to the margins of the kingdom? It is a scenario that is as plausible as any other.

Who were the 'Lao' anyway?

Laos' pre-eminent historian, Maha Sila Viravong, in his *Phongsavadan Lao*, explores various speculations, such as that by the Thai nationalist, Luang Wichit Wathakan, who claimed that Lao came from the tribal name 'Lawa', a people in the far north of Thailand and Myanmar who mixed with the Tai on their alleged trek south from Nan Chao, and called the latter 'Lao'. Or, 'Lao' was somehow a transformation of 'Dao',

⁷ The story of Fa Ngum's Xieng Khouang diversion conforms to Hoshino's model.

star, which could be ‘heaven’ (Maha Sila, 1957: 6-9). Sila finally decides, somewhat predictably (and without giving any argumentation), that Lao derives from Luang, and means Great and Civilised. And, he settles for the Reverend Dodd’s assertions in the *Tai Race: the Elder Brother of the Chinese* (1923) that the Lao are one of the oldest ‘races’ in the world, equal to, if not older than, the Chinese. The argument is embarrassingly amateurish, but strangely it is as good as it gets among Lao historians.

In fact, the origin of the term ‘Lao’ is Chinese.

The ‘Lao’ 獠 (sometimes written as Leao or Liao in European languages⁸) were so-called since the first Chinese push into Sichuan by the Qin. It is a term that in Sichuan covered a wide range of uplanders, who were an endless source of trouble for the Chinese. The latter typically attributed to them all kinds of uncivilised practices, such as having no surnames, eating their enemies, and so on. They were spread across the highland areas of Sichuan and into northern Guizhou. Ma (1883: 120) in the 13th century, after a long discussion of the Sichuan Lao, reports: “Today one hears about more than a *hundred varieties* [my emphasis] of Leao [Lao] in the south-west regions of *Yeou-kiang*”, that is, the Right River in Guangxi. In fact, the term Lao had been brought south by the Han armies, who also used it to describe the troublesome uplanders that they encountered there. Edward Schafer (1967: 48-9) observes:

As the Lao and their cousins were overwhelmed in the Han-Tang interval, their name was gradually extended by the Chinese to all southern savages as a term of contempt, and by Tang times the most diverse cultures of Nam-Viet, some quite unlike the original Lao, were styled “Lao” as they had already been loosely called “Man.” In Sung times the term “Lao of the sea” was applied even to the Arabs.

Michael Churchman (2011: 70) concurs with ‘Chinese scholarship’ that “the terms Yi and Man mean ‘barbarian’, but that Li, Lao and Wuhu refer to ethnic groupings”, with the Lao being figured as Tai. No argument is provided, but even a cursory look at the texts would suggest that ‘Lao’ refers to some of the most ‘savage’ groups. We cannot go into the problem in detail here, but there is an issue over ethnic identification in pre-modern Chinese annals where ethnic designations are inconsistent – broad in one instance, narrow in another. Even later Chinese chroniclers, such as Che Fan (1908: 333) in his *Tien Hi* of 1807 in the chapter *Chou Yi*, or on the submission of the barbarians of Yunnan, complains:

Yet the barbarian races are very numerous and difficult to categorise. Moreover, previously and still today, they are continuously transformed and split up; what has

⁸ Inez de Beauclair (1970: 149) clarifies the reading of this character: “As the name of tribes it has to be read as lao, otherwise liao, meaning to hunt by night.” Ma (1883: 106) warns the reader not to mistake them with the similarly called Leao, known also as Ki-tan, a formidable people on the empire’s northern border. As for 獠, one must note the radical indicating their sub-human status. As Schafer (1967: 57) writes: “The Man and the Lao and all the rest of them were animalian, and the graphs that represented their names almost invariably showed the recognizable symbol of a wild beast or a reptile.”

been written about them is really erroneous, and to repeat (the words of the ancient authors) would have the result of multiplying the confusions.

After poring over the Chinese sources to try to understand the ethnicities along the Chinese-Vietnamese border, G. Deviera (1886: 87) wrote:

Although the names given by the Chinese are far from having an ethnic signification, they will vary by locality and even when designating individuals of the same race, we have decided that in the absence of better information these descriptions of these people from Chinese sources can offer some interest.

The fact that Guangxi had many Tai meant that some would be encompassed by the general term Lao, but many so-called ‘Lao’ were in fact not Tai. Inez de Beauclair (1970: 148-89) has probably provided the most exhaustive account of the use of ‘Lao’ as an ethnic marker in her discussion of the history of the Keh Lao of Guizhou.⁹ But she stays so close to her Chinese sources that, in the end, she cannot distinguish the wood from the trees; there are ‘Lao’ everywhere, and she actually proves Schafer’s point about the indiscriminate use of the category by the Chinese.

Nevertheless, it seems clear that a group of Tai speakers adopted ‘Lao’ as their ethnonym, and it was they who set off down the rivers of northern Vietnam and Laos, in particular the Nam Ou.¹⁰ Basing his comments on an ethnolinguistic map compiled by the EFEO in 1949, Jim Chamberlain (1991: 467) concludes that:

If density of population is any indication, the main route of Lao migration was along the Nam Ou, through Muang Khoa, Muang Ngoy to Pak Ou, into Luang Phrabang, and southward along the Mekhong to Xagnaboury, Pak Lai and Khene Thao.

The use of this ethnonym would have expanded following the Lao domination of Luang Phrabang and the rise of Lan Xang, and the need of the kingdom and its people to say who they were. The Lao are first registered in the famous 13th century Ram Khamhaeng inscription of Sukhothai, where they hardly stand out from the other Tai in the region: “All the Ma, the Kao, the Lao, the Tai of the lands under the vault of heaven and the Tai who live along the Ou and the Khong come to do obeisance to King Sri

⁹ De Beauclair’s essay was written in 1946, and has a small linguistic appendix in which she seems inclined to associate the Keh Lao with Austroasiatic or Tibeto-Burman speakers. Modern linguists say the Keh Lao are Kadai speakers (see Edmondson and Solnit 1997).

¹⁰ Guignard (1911: 233) recognised this association of ‘Lao’ with ‘barbarian’ and wrote: “It is therefore probable that the name was given by their Chinese neighbours. Previously Chinese authors tended to call the Thay thus, and in our days the Chinese of the two Kouang still give this name Lao to mountain tribes, principally those who are Thay, who inhabit the south of their two Chinese provinces, and also to the people who inhabit the mountains of Keoui-Tcheou [Guichou].” Michel Ferlus (2006b: 3) provides a linguistic reconstruction of the term Lao and recognises its origins in Chinese, but says nothing about how the ethnonym was used.

Indraditya's son King Rama Khamhaeng."¹¹ Lefèvre-Pontalis (1897: 65) suggests that 'Muong Lao' arose "in opposition to those of *Muong-Lu* and *Muong-Youne* [Lanna]." Indeed, as Lorrillard (2006: 401) has pointed out, it is only in the 15th century that the *Chiang Mai Chronicle* mentions the Lao again, "providing them with recognition on the regional scene." Of course, many other Tai who were migrating into the south-west did not call themselves Lao at all, although much later if they were finally caught in the web of one Lao state or another, they would begin to adopt this ethnonym. Most people identified with either their village or their *muang*, i.e., in answer to the question 'who are you?' the response was (until recently in Laos) 'I am *Tai Ban Khao*' (I am a White Village person), or 'I am *Tai Muang Khao*' (I am from White Muang).¹²

As for the Chinese, when the Lao state of Lan Xang appeared on the horizons of the Ming Dynasty it was called either Lao Zhua 老撾 or Lao Wo (as it still is today by Mandarin speakers). Lao Zhua was perhaps an attempt to render 'Swa', as the former kingdom in Luang Prabang was known, but Lao Wo soon became more common.¹³ What is intriguing, however, is that the Chinese name is clearly also an attempt to find a homophone for the name 'Lao'. Of course, they already had 獠, but the latter referred to barbarian groups inside China, and this would appear to have also ruled out simply dropping the radical to write Lao as 寮. So they used 老, whose primary meaning is old. And, it has stayed that way – although the modern Chinese spelling of Lao Wo is 老撾. There is, of course, an irony in all of this in that the Tai/Lao, who migrated down to Luang Phrabang, took the ethnonym with them, but not the Chinese spelling of it, thus disguising the ethnonym's origins. Consequently, when the Ming encountered 'the Lao' of Lao Zhua, they assumed that they were doing so for the first time.

Similarly, there has been rather simplistic speculation about the ethnic terms Tai Khao, White Tai, and Tai Dam, Black Tai, mostly associated with the alleged colour of the people's clothing – which certainly must be baffling for the modern traveller, who is confronted by an array of colours. Once again, it seems that these terms may have a Chinese origin. In Fan Cho's *Man Shu* (1961: 33), written in the 9th century about the Nan Chao Kingdom, he describes the dominant groups there as, "The Western Ts'uan [Tuan] are the Pai Man (White Man). The Eastern Ts'uan [Tuan] are the Wu Man (Black Man)." The Lolo of Yunnan were also divided into black and white.¹⁴ The White Tai

¹¹ This is a slight adaptation of the translation by Griswold and Prasert (1971: 216). For the original in Thai, see Chamberlain (1991: xxv).

¹² Guignard (1911: 243) commented that the Laotians, even more than the Siamese, "subdivide their *tribus* to infinity giving them the name of the regions that they inhabit."

¹³ Both *Zhua* and *Wo* have the same meaning 'to beat, to strike', which further suggests that *Zhua* was an attempt to find a homophone for 'Swa'. *Zhua* probably declined as the Chinese realised that *muang Swa* no longer existed. A dictionary produced in Hong Kong still uses the non-PRC spelling for the country, but it also suggests that it is equally acceptable to refer to Lao people using either 老 or 寮 (Lu, 1992: 995).

¹⁴ Michel Ferlus (2009: 2) in an examination of the etymology of the term 'Bai Yue' writes: "Currently, several ethnic groups in South East Asia and south China are designated by expressions interpreted as "white," White Yi, White Thai, etc. One may wonder if the source is not simply the ethnonym * *b.rak* which over the centuries may have been reinterpreted by the *bái* phonogram 白. Subsequently, the ethnic compounds containing the word "black" were introduced to satisfy a

were known as Bai-bó-yi (白僰夷), the white barbarians, and the Black Tai as Hei-bó-yi (黑僰夷), the black barbarians. The character *bó* (僰) apparently refers to an ‘ancient’ tribal group. One implication was that the ‘white’ group was more ‘civilised’ (Sinicised) than the black group. In Indochina, the terms Black Tai and White Tai seem to have only become common during French colonial rule. Previously, and to the extent that the Vietnamese required a general term for the Tai, they called them Tho (土), more or less signifying ‘aboriginal’. In modern Vietnam, Tho has been discarded and Thay is used instead.

Everyday migration

Rural communities based on irrigated, wet rice agriculture, are generally stable communities. Farmers are understandably reluctant to abandon diked paddy fields, *thong na*, into which they have put considerable labour. But upland Tai in the valleys of the hills and mountains of Laos, even today, commonly combine paddy rice agriculture with upland dry rice cultivation. These dry fields, *hai*, are also important for other crops, such as cotton or maize. This combination of *na* and *hai* has always been important to Tai communities, and each community, and indeed each family in those communities, had varying combinations of *na* and *hai*. The carrying capacity of each valley, naturally, varied and so, population growth would eventually require some people to move, most often those dependent on only *hai*. Just how far people moved depended on local conditions, but throughout the region one will find the term *mai* (new) appended to one village or another; so the original village will be called *ban khao*, white village, and its offshoot *ban khaomai*, new white village. Such villages are normally close to each other. But in some cases villagers moved long distances, maybe due to a village dispute, and they established new villages with new names. Running through the valleys where the upland Tai lived were rivers, and the Tai gained a reputation for their boating skills, something that clearly facilitated moving long distances when necessary.

Establishing a new village was hard, backbreaking work. Trees needed to be felled and cleared, and houses built, initially somewhat flimsy bamboo constructions, which with the felled logs were later turned into sturdy houses. Migrants can only bring so much rice and other foods with them, so from the beginning hunting and fishing, and gathering by women in the forests, provided crucial supplements to the migrants’ everyday diet. They were, for a while, peasant-hunter-gatherers.

David Holm gives a Buyi account of internal migration from Guangxi to Guizhou, related in a ritual text, ‘Opening of the Domain’, where it is clear that a reason for moving is pressure on available paddy land: “One only got wetfield for the older sibling, One didn’t get wetfield for the younger sibling.” They cut down trees to make boats, and made bamboo rafts that they punted upstream into domains already held by other ‘lineages’. Yet, they overcame various obstacles and established themselves in a new area. Holm remarks, “Overall, it is evident that the dominant direction of migration is upstream from south to north. This accords with other traditions and generally accepted

cultural need for balance and harmony.”

theories about the prehistoric migrations of speakers of Northern Tai into the Guizhou highlands from points of origin south and east” (Holm 2009: 28). Talk of prehistoric migrations in this context seem to me to be a misunderstanding of what a tale like this is telling – which relates to population pressure in living memory, and of course one should not overlook the population pressure exerted by incoming Chinese migrants which caused Tai to move further into the rugged hinterlands of both Guangxi and Guizhou. Indeed, the Chinese populated the south-east of Guangxi and then moved inland, often pushing out the Tai and others before them. But he remarks, correctly, that “these accounts operated within village society as cultural reflections of mobility, and served as reminders that migration was an option to be considered again if circumstances required” (Holm 2009: 35).

At the time of the initial exodus, the *jimi* system was still not entrenched in the region, and Tai chieftains who benefited from that system still had little control over the movement of their people. Influential local village leaders probably played the most important role in decisions to move. One other resource that these upland regions had was alluvial gold that they traded with the lowlands. Leaving behind these resources would have been hard, but panning for alluvial gold is relatively easy, and uplanders can still be seen doing it throughout the Indochina mountain regions.

Many studies of Tai groups have written about their migrations and their establishment of new villages, although there is little information from the early historical period. But again, what we know of Tai peasants in the 19th and 20th centuries leads us to believe that the dynamics of movement and the difficulties of establishing new villages were not all that different a thousand years ago. The accounts we have of village formation and migration are from Tai groups who already fell within the orbit of a Tai state, unlike those in the initial Tai diaspora who were fleeing the Chinese state into areas beyond the reach of a state, or only weakly within its influence. Significantly, early Tai states like Ayutthaya, issued edicts to try to entice peasants to leave the forests and settle within their jurisdiction as paddy farmers, and indeed it has often been said that the main problem for Southeast Asian states was manpower. Lorraine Gesick remarks in her thesis on Siamese kingship, “Thus in studying the Ayudiyian and Bangkok kingdoms one frequently comes across decrees exhorting the *chaomuang* to *kliaklom* (persuade, entice) the people hiding in the forests to come and settle in the *muang* and *tham pa pen na* (make the forest into ricefields) and make the *muang* prosperous’ (Gesick, 1976: 16). While land was still abundant and while there were forests to flee to, Tai peasants were notoriously footloose when confronted with excessive state demands.

In his excellent account of the peopling of the Chi River basin in North-east Thailand by the Lao from the 18th century onwards, Charles Keyes underlines the interaction between the state and peasants in the process. It was partly the establishment of new *muang* by the state that attracted peasants, but expansion was also a spontaneous process as a result of demographic pressures.

The quest for land took such people only as far away from their home village as was necessary for them to find uncultivated land. It was rare for only one couple from a village to move out of their home village and settle on a homestead. More

usually, several families would move together and found the nucleus of a new village (Keyes, 1976: 54).

Lucien Hanks, in his classic *Rice and Man* (1972), writing about a newly opened up area north of Bangkok as ‘The Years of Shifting Cultivation: 1850-90,’ shows the hardship undergone by farmers to open up new paddy lands, and this was an area where at least some trade with urban Bangkok was possible:

The land promised nothing but struggle... the uniform dreariness of the wilderness [was] depressing. The variations are of season only, not of person, scene or event... Instead, there is isolation, with few occasions for gaiety, and the foreboding blackness of night outside the bamboo shack. Just to feed a household requires many hours of toil (Hanks, 1972: 76).

The re-peopling of the Thai North-east with Lao following the population decline in the region from the 13th to the 17th century following the decline of Angkor, was not only a result of spontaneous movements of peasants, but also the forced relocation of peoples from the left bank of the Mekong into the north-east in the decades following the failure of the King of Vientiane, Chao Anu, in his war with Bangkok in 1827-28. For example, in the 1870s a British consular official reported on the plight of people brought down from the Phuan areas on and around the Plain of Jars:

the unfortunate creatures – men, women and children, many of the latter still in arms – were driven off in droves through the jungles from [the Phuan state] to Pichai the nearest point on the [Chao Phraya] river. This terrible march occupied more than a month... The captives were hurried along mercilessly, many weighed with burdens strapped on their backs... they were placed on rafts and brought down the river to the place where I saw them (quoted in Smuckarn and Breazeale, 1988: 54).

Smaller relocations of peoples by Tai states occurred across the region. In the area in northern Thailand where Michael Moerman (1968: 13) did his fieldwork, he reported that Tai Lue villagers had been forcefully deported there in the 19th century from the Sip Song Panna to open up lands under the aegis of the Siamese state, and hence strengthen the latter’s claims to border regions. A well-known Lue village on the outskirts of Luang Phrabang was also settled with people deported from the Sip Song Panna around the same time.

In his study of Thai-Lao Buddhism, Hayashi Yukio (2003: 61) noted that “most of the non-Lao living in northeast Thailand view the Lao as a sort of nomadic people who are able to generate some form of economic gain from ‘comparatively’ excessive moving.” Austroasiatic peoples were scattered across Laos and north-eastern Thailand before the arrival of the Tai/Lao, and are recognised in modern times as Suai (Kui), Kaloeng, Nyo, Yoi and Khmer. A member of another small group, the Nyakhur, saw the Lao and Thai in the following way: they “are comparable to *mot ngam* [a type of ant:

pheidologetonwersus] which seek out and surround banana and sugarcane. They swarm around anything sweet, devouring it completely. We [Chao Bon, i.e., uplanders] did not eat anything but they ate everything without leaving a single scrap” (Hayashi, 2003: 53).

The territories the Tai launched themselves into were sparsely populated with Austroasiatic populations or Tibeto-Burman ones, and indeed many of them already occupied some of the most fertile valleys. Given the hard work of establishing new villages and fields, one can see the attractions of aggressively dispossessing them when possible.

There were, of course, trading routes criss-crossing the mountains and rivers, and the Tai established themselves at river junctions, and where trails connected with rivers. But for most Tai, trade was not their dominant activity. Perhaps there were already networks of occasional markets for produce, and if not they probably established them. That is where women (normally) will congregate early in the morning on the fringes of a particular village to sell their wares every week or two weeks, and disperse before the sun becomes too hot. More regular markets were only to be found in towns connected to, for example, the lowland state in northern Vietnam.

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