

The Hypothesis of a New Branch for the Tai Languages

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INTRODUCTION

It is generally accepted that the Tai family of languages is divided into three branches: Northern, Central and Southwestern.¹ This subgroup scheme was formulated by Professor Li Fang-Kuei (Li 1959, 1960, 1977) on the basis of both phonological and lexical criteria. While Li's phonological criteria remain the yardstick for comparative Tai, opinions split as to the utility of lexical classification.²

It is important to note that before his reconstruction of Proto Tai phonological system (Li 1977), Li had relied almost entirely on lexical classification (1959, 1960). He still laid great emphasis on this model in his later works (1977, 1988), maintaining that certain lexical distribution patterns are particularly pertinent to Tai subgrouping. It is significant to see that the tripartite scheme was arrived at by two different methods.

In this paper, I wish to propose a new branch of Tai along the lines of Li. My assumption is based on Dehong, a Chinese Shan dialect spoken in Yunnan, southwestern China. This dialect is located in the top northwestern part of the Tai speaking area, separated from Northern Tai by Tai Lue of Sipsongpanna and some other Southwestern dialects along the Lancang (upper reaches of the Mekong) River. The dialect studied here is spoken at Mangshi, capital of Lusi County and Dehong Dai Autonomous Prefecture. While Dehong displays certain characteristics of Southwestern Tai, it also possesses a number of Northern and Central features that are generally lacking in the Southwestern Branch, which make this dialect unique among the Tai languages.

SOME PHONOLOGICAL AND LEXICAL SUBGROUP FEATURES FOR TAI

Before taking up my discussion of Dehong, it will be useful to have a look at certain phonological subgroup features as spelt out in Li (1977, here after HCT).

The following are among the most distinctive branch features, all of which are believed to go back to proto initial clusters involving the liquid *-r-*:

¹ For other theories of Tai classification, see Haudricourt (1974) and Gedney (1989).

² For example, Gedney (personal communication.) believes that "only phonology, and phonology alone, can be used for classifying the Tai dialects."

PT	SW	CT	NT
* <i>vr</i>	<i>phr, ph</i>	<i>pj</i>	<i>š</i>
* <i>thr</i>	<i>h</i>	<i>h, th</i>	<i>r</i>
* <i>xr</i>	<i>h</i>	<i>h, l, s</i>	<i>r</i>

Of these, the representations of **xr* is especially pertinent to our discussion, as will be seen. Also relevant are two basic vowels (parentheses = less frequent reflexes):

PT	SW	CT	NT
* <i>ɔ</i>	<i>ɔ</i>	<u><i>o</i></u>	<u><i>o</i></u>
* <i>o</i>	<u><i>o (u)</i></u>	<u><i>o (u)</i></u>	<i>ɔ</i>

There are some variations among the Central dialects, some of which show Northern features, such as Nung Fan Slihng. The reconstructed forms are obviously based on the SW languages.

In addition, the Northern dialects (except the Bouyei dialect of Shuicheng and the displaced Saek) are set off from non-Northern dialects by their lack of aspirated sounds that are believed to have come from the original aspirated sounds.

PT	SW	CT	NT
* <i>kh</i>	<i>kh</i>	<i>kh</i>	<i>k</i>
* <i>ph</i>	<i>ph</i>	<i>ph</i>	<i>p</i>
* <i>th</i>	<i>th</i>	<i>th</i>	<i>t</i>

Furthermore, lexical items like the following are often used as diagnostic features for Tai subgrouping (Li, 1959, p. 18).

Gloss	Thai	Lao	Lungchow	Tay	Wuming	Po-ai
to count	<i>nap D2</i>	<i>nap D2</i>	—	—	—	—
cold	<i>naau A1</i>	<i>naau A1</i>	—	—	—	—
cloudy	—	—	<i>kham A1</i>	<i>kham A1</i>	—	—
<i>mother's brother</i>	—	—	<i>khu C1</i>	<i>khu C1</i>	—	—
tiger	—	—	—	—	<i>kuk D1</i>	<i>kuk D1</i>
lazy	—	—	—	—	<i>klik D1</i>	<i>čik D1</i>

Such words are restricted to Northern, Central, or Southwestern area(s) only. Their distribution patterns may well represent an isoglossal line for Tai dialects.

In my study of the Tai languages, a number of formerly restricted dialect words are found to be pan-Tai cognates for which Dehong provides the missing link (Luo, 1997a, b). New data also show that a significant number of Northern words are represented in Dehong. Some of these words show traces of migration movements of early Tai speakers. Below I turn my attention to these points.

DEHONG: SOME PHONOLOGICAL AND LEXICAL FEATURES

One of the most interesting things about Dehong is its possession of some non-Southwestern phonological features. Among them the most striking is the alternation between the velar fricative /x/ and the dental fricative /s/ for words of the following type:

Gloss		Dehong	
cast net	<i>xe</i> ¹	~	<i>se</i> ¹
excrement	<i>xi</i> ⁴	~	<i>si</i> ⁴
arm	<i>xɛn</i> ¹	~	<i>sɛn</i> ¹
burnt, scorched	<i>xɛm</i> ⁴	~	<i>sɛm</i> ⁴
chopping board	<i>xɛŋ</i> ¹	~	<i>sɛŋ</i> ¹
guest	<i>xɛk</i> ³	~	<i>sɛk</i> ³

Particularly worth noting are items like ‘cast net,’ ‘burnt, scorched,’ which go back to Proto Tai **xr-* (see the preceding section). These are rendered with /s/ or /š/ in some Central and Northern dialects (Li, 1977, p. 233; Chinese Academy of Sciences, 1959). No other Southwestern dialects are found to have this feature. Reflexes of this kind are reconstructed by Haudricourt with proto sibilant clusters **sr-* and **tsr-* (Haudricourt, 1974, pp. 467, 488). Data from Western Nung (Gedney, 1995) show remarkable similarities to Dehong’s representation of [s] for items like ‘guest,’ ‘arm,’ and ‘excrement’; cf. Sin Fong Yiw *chen*¹ ‘arm,’ *chɛk*² ‘guest,’ *chii*³ ‘excrement,’ *ching*¹ ‘chopping board.’ These latter words are reconstructed with **x* by Li in view of data from other dialects. Reflexes in Dehong and Western Nung indicate that they go back to proto **xr*.

More cognates under Li’s reconstructed **x* are found to show /x/ ~ /s/ alternations in Dehong.

Gloss	Dehong	
green	<i>xɛu</i> ¹	~ <i>seu</i> ¹
tooth	<i>xɛu</i> ⁴	~ <i>seu</i> ⁴
bad smell, putrid	<i>xɛu</i> ²	~ <i>sɛu</i> ²

Li notes that these examples take the triphthong [iau] in Thai, represented as *khiau* (A1), *khiau* (C1) and *khiau* (A1) respectively (1977, pp. 208–212). He also notes that these items take velar clusters in Ahom, which he finds “spurious.” Incidentally, ‘tooth’ is represented with [l] in some Northern dialects, such as Fengshan *leu*³ (C1). My data suggest that the examples in Dehong are not instances of synchronic free variations but remnants of a diachronic process.

A similar case is the word for ‘frog,’ cf. Dehong *xet*³ ~ *set*³ (D1), which also takes the final /-iat/ in Thai, *khia*t, with alternating /kh/ or /x/ in White Tai and the labio-velar /khu- (khw-)/ in Tay and Tho (Li, 1977, pp. 194, 198). Li is uncertain about the origin of this proto-initial, tentatively grouping it under **kh-*. We may treat this as a case of velar cluster, in view of the available data.

Less systematic but by no means unimportant are cases where Dehong sides with the Northern languages in showing unaspirated initials for items that are generally represented with aspirated initials in non-Northern languages.

Gloss	PT initial	Tone	Thai	Lungchow	Po-ai	Dehong
board	* <i>ph</i>	<i>B1</i>	<i>phœn</i>	<i>phœn</i>	<i>peen</i>	<i>pœn C1</i>
clf. for people	* <i>ph</i>	<i>C1</i>	<i>phuu</i>	<i>puu</i>	<i>puu</i>	<i>pu¹ A1</i>
hold, carry	* <i>th</i>	<i>A1/2</i>	<i>thii A1</i>	<i>thii A1</i>	<i>tii A2</i>	<i>tii A2</i>
add on	* <i>th</i>	<i>A1</i>	<i>thɛɛm</i>	—	<i>tɛm</i>	<i>tɛm</i>
overcast	* <i>kh</i>	<i>B1</i>	—	<i>kham</i>	—	<i>kaam C1</i>
hit, crack	* <i>kh</i>	<i>D1</i>	<i>kheck</i>	—	<i>kɛk</i>	<i>kɔk</i>

These have been reconstructed with aspirated sounds for Proto Tai (Li, 1977, pp. 64, 102, 193). Some of these examples are believed to have come from historically voiced initials in Proto-Tai (Gedney, 1989, pp. 229–270). Particularly revealing are items like ‘hold, carry,’ for which the overwhelming majority of non-Northern dialect shows an aspirated [th] with tone A1. Note that for ‘classifier for people,’ Dehong has two forms, *pu¹* (A1) and *phu³* (B1), the latter a Southwestern form.

For finals, Dehong is like non-Southwestern dialects in taking /o/ and /e/ for open syllables. Consider the following:

Gloss	Tone	Thai	Lue	WT	Dehong	Nung	Po-ai	Fengshan
father	<i>B2</i>	<i>pɔɔ</i>	<i>pɔ</i>	<i>pɔ</i>	<u><i>po</i></u>	<u><i>po</i></u>	<u><i>po</i></u>	<u><i>po</i></u>
neck, throat	<i>A2</i>	<i>khɔɔ</i>	<i>xɔ</i>	<i>xɔ</i>	<u><i>ho</i></u>	<u><i>xo</i></u>	<u><i>ho</i></u>	<u><i>ho</i></u>
mother	<i>B2</i>	<i>mɛɛ</i>	<i>mɛ</i>	<i>mɛ</i>	<u><i>me</i></u>	<u><i>me</i></u>	<u><i>me</i></u>	<u><i>me</i></u>
old	<i>B1</i>	<i>kɛɛ</i>	<i>kɛ</i>	<i>kɛ</i>	<u><i>ke</i></u>	<u><i>ke</i></u>	<u><i>tɛɛ</i></u>	<u><i>tɛɛ</i></u>

The majority of the Southwestern dialects take the low back /ɔ/ and the mid front /ɛ/ for words of this kind, for which Li has proposed *ɔ and *ɛ respectively (Li, 1977, pp. 273, 277). Data from Dehong and the Northern languages have led us to the postulation of *o and *e (Luo, 1997b, pp. 56-63), merging with Li’s *o and *e, thus leading to a basic seven-vowel system instead of Li’s nine-vowel system for Proto-Tai.

Perhaps the most spectacular aspect of Dehong is the presence of a significant number of words that are labeled as “not found in the Southwestern dialects” in HCT, as shown in the table below. These items are generally not found in other Southwestern dialects in our data, except in Tai Lue of Sipsongpanna, where some of the above forms such as *liŋ* (B1) ‘to be steep’ and *tsoŋ* (C1) ‘umbrella’ occur.³ Thus Dehong may very well be said to supply a “missing link” for pan-Tai status for a number of lexical items that were formerly found to be otherwise restricted to non-Southwestern dialects.

³Incidentally ‘steep’ is also found in Siamese in compounds like *taliŋ* [B1] ‘steep bank,’ and *tsoŋ* (C1) ‘umbrella’ is also common in Shan varieties such as Phake and Aiton.

Gloss	Tone	Dehong	Lungchow	Fengshan	In Li (1977)
piece, classifier	<i>B1</i>	<i>kaai A1</i>	<i>kaai</i>	<i>kaai</i>	(§10.1, item 3)
steep, abrupt	<i>B1</i>	<i>liŋ</i>	<i>liŋ</i>	<i>liŋ</i>	(§8.2, item 19)
to resemble	<i>C1</i>	<i>thum B1</i>	<i>Ningming lom</i>	<i>lum</i>	(§8.2, item 26)
to redeem, tribute	<i>B2</i>	<i>lu B1</i>	<i>T'ienpao lou</i>	<i>lu</i>	(§7.6, item 22)
shuttle (of loom)	<i>B1</i>	<i>tau</i>	<i>T'ienpao tau</i>	<i>tau</i>	(§5.3, item 5)
umbrella	<i>C1</i>	<i>tsəŋ</i>	<i>liŋ</i>	<i>luaŋ</i>	(§8.2, item 36)
water mill	<i>D1</i>	<i>xok⁵ D2</i>	<i>Nung lôk</i>	<i>lôk</i>	(§8.2, item 21)
dirty	<i>C1</i>	<i>sam</i>	<i>ɬam</i>	<i>Po-ai ɬaam</i>	(§13.1, item 12)

More examples of this kind are easily found:

Gloss	Proposed PT Initial	Tone	DH	L'ming	Nung	Yay	FS
to crawl through (a narrow space)	<i>*ʔd</i>	<i>C1</i>	<i>lan</i>	—	<i>dun</i>	<i>don</i>	<i>doon</i>
to burn over fire	<i>*bl</i>	<i>A2</i>	<i>laam</i>	—	<i>pem</i>	<i>pyaam</i>	<i>pjaam</i>
right in the middle	<i>*d</i>	<i>A2</i>	<i>teŋ A1</i>	—	<i>tiŋ</i>	<i>teŋ</i>	<i>teŋ</i>
to gather, collect	<i>*d</i>	<i>A2</i>	<i>to</i>	<i>too</i>	<i>to</i>	<i>to</i>	<i>to</i>
rapids in river	<i>*hl</i>	<i>B1</i>	<i>laai</i>	<i>laay</i>	—	<i>raay</i>	<i>laai</i>
half old, half new	<i>*hm</i>	<i>A1</i>	<i>moŋ</i>	<i>maŋ</i>	—	<i>maŋ</i>	<i>maŋ</i>
to merge, gather up	<i>*khl</i>	<i>C1</i>	<i>xon</i>	<i>can</i>	—	<i>con</i>	<i>təoon</i>
late, tardy	<i>*l</i>	<i>D1</i>	<i>lut D2S</i>	<i>WT lut</i>	—	<i>lot</i>	<i>loot</i>
to till, tilling	<i>*m</i>	<i>A1/2</i>	<i>mun</i>	<i>muun</i>	—	—	<i>muun</i>
patch (of field)	<i>*r</i>	<i>B2</i>	<i>haw</i>	—	<i>laay</i>	<i>raay</i>	<i>laai</i>
to bounce, splatter	<i>*z</i>	<i>A2</i>	<i>sin A1</i>	<i>sin</i>	—	<i>θin</i>	<i>θin</i>
to crowd into a small place	<i>*z</i>	<i>C2</i>	<i>sən A2</i>	—	<i>san</i>	<i>san</i>	<i>θen</i>

These are not included in HCT, but they all appear to be good pan-Tai cognates. Particularly important are words like 'to gather, collect,' 'rapids in river,' 'to crawl through a narrow space,' 'to burn over fire,' and 'patch (of field)' (differentiated from *hai*^{B2} 'upland field' in Dehong), which reflect early Tai culture. None of them are found to be represented in other Southwestern dialects in our data.⁴ Note, too, that not every item is found in the two representative Central dialects.

⁴ Gerold Edmondson (personal communication) reports that they are found in some Shan dialects in Myanmar.

More significant still are items that are shared by Dehong and the Northern dialects only. The following three examples are illuminating:

Gloss	PT Initial	Tone	DH	Yay	FS	Saek
do not ...yet	* <i>b</i>	<i>B2</i>	<i>paa</i>	<i>paa</i>	<i>paa</i>	<i>phaa</i>
to pole (a boat)	* <i>š</i>	<i>B1</i>	<i>seŋ</i>	<i>seŋ</i>	<i>ceŋ</i>	<i>kunun</i>
to have a stomach ache	* <i>V</i>	<i>C2</i>	<i>xon</i>	<i>hun</i>	<i>hun</i>	<i>hwaan</i>
to stand	* <i>z</i>	<i>A2</i>	<i>soŋ</i>	<i>soŋ</i>	<i>soŋ</i>	<i>yɔŋ</i>

These examples are all found in Saek, indicating that they are common Northern words. The first item is a grammatical-functional operator characteristic of the Northern languages. This word is not found in any other non-Northern dialects in my data. For 'to pole (a boat),' the Saek form means 'to pry up,' which may not be related. For 'stand,' Saek has the palatal semivowel /y/, which is found to be a special feature of this language to represent the Proto-Tai sibilant fricative **z*-, cf. Saek *yak*⁶ 'to wash (clothes)' (from PT **zak*), *yɔɔ*⁵ 'to be straight' (from PT **zïo*), *yaa*⁴ 'to roast' (from PT **č*).

In a number of cases, such shared items are found in Dehong, Yay, and Fengshan only, but not in Saek. The following examples illustrate the matter.

Gloss	PT	Tone	DH	Yay	FS
a kind of bamboo	* <i>ʔdr</i>	<i>D1S</i>	<i>hok</i>	<i>dok</i>	<i>dɔk</i>
to mix, be mixed up	* <i>dl</i>	<i>C2</i>	<i>lo A2</i>	<i>riaw</i>	<i>liaw</i>
to donate, ransom	* <i>dl/r</i>	<i>B2</i>	<i>lu B1</i>	<i>ru</i>	<i>lu</i>
back basket	* <i>j</i>	<i>C2</i>	<i>yɔŋ B2/A1</i>	<i>yaŋ</i>	<i>yaŋ</i>
a kind of tree	* <i>j</i>	<i>A2</i>	<i>yom</i>	<i>yam</i>	<i>jam</i>
plump, well-filled	* <i>mw</i>	<i>D2L</i>	<i>maak</i>	<i>faak</i>	<i>faak</i>
to pound rice slightly to make it whiter	* <i>š</i>	<i>D1S</i>	<i>sut</i>	<i>sop</i>	<i>sop</i>
time of a cock crowing	* <i>z</i>	<i>B2</i>	<i>sau</i>	<i>θaw</i>	<i>θau</i>
place, market, town	* <i>g</i>	<i>C2</i>	<i>tse B2</i>	<i>ce</i>	<i>tçe</i>

Again these appear to be everyday Tai words, which one would expect to find in every Tai dialect. Especially revealing are items like 'a kind of bamboo,' 'back basket,' 'plump, well-filled,' 'to pound rice lightly,' and 'time of a cock crowing.' Of these, 'back basket' and 'time of a cock crowing' merit special mention. The form for 'back basket' is also found in Tai Ya among the Southwestern dialects in our data, with tone A1. 'Time of a cock crowing' is a very important cultural concept for measuring time in Tai. Note that Dehong is the only Southwestern dialect in my data that preserves the item, which is widely distributed in the Northern dialects. This form may be related to the item for 'morning, early,' which is quite uniformly represented among the Tai languages and which Li has reconstructed as **ɰau* (C2) (1977, p. 168).

Several items are found to occur in Dehong and Fengshan, but not in Yay.

Gloss	PT	Tone	Dehong	Yay	Fengshan
to hit, strike, punch	*ʔb	C1	maŋ B2	—	bəŋ
a piece (of land)	*l	D2	lək D1	—	look D2
to splash, sprinkle	*Z	A1/2	son A2	—	θɔŋ A1
a kind of eel-like fish	*č	A1	tsi B1, si A2	—	çi
to kick (of a horse)	*ʔ	A1	ʔeŋ	—	*ʔeŋ
no, not	*ʔ	B1/C1	ʔam B1	—	*ʔam C1

Although not found in Yay, these items are common in other Northern dialects. They may have been lost in Yay during migration to the Central Tai area. The fact that Dehong still retains these words indicates that they are remnants of Northern Tai.

In a few cases, Dehong has Southwestern words alongside Northern ones, e.g., *kan* (A1) (SW), *hom* (B2) (NT) 'together, along with'; *hau* (A1) (SW), *tuk* (D2) (NT, cf. Wuming *tik*⁵) 'progressive marker'; *mən* (A1) (SW), *thum* (B1) (NT) 'resemble, be alike.'

In my data a number of common Northern words are found in Dehong and White Tai. Some of these words are also found in Nung Fan Slihng, but not in other non-Northern dialects.

Gloss	Tone	Dehong	White Tai	Nung	Yay	Fengshan
barnyard grass	A1	vaŋ	vaŋ	vaŋ	hoŋ	vaŋ
bedroom	D2S	luk D1	luk 'store-house'	—	ruk D2	luk D2
late, tardy	D1L	lut D2S	lut	—	lot	loot
cut crosswise	B1	xan	xan	—	—	kan
wear out, not sharp	B2/ C1,2	pom B2	pum C1	pum C1	pum C2	pum C2
pierce through	B1/ C1	pɔŋ B1	pɔŋ B1	—	pyoŋ C1	pyɔŋ C1
beam	A1/2	fəaŋ A2	fəaŋ	—	fəaŋ	fəaŋ
wash rice	A2	thau C2	taau	—	taaw	taau

Of the above items, Black Tai has *duk* (D1) 'bedroom,' *taau* (A2) 'wash rice.' The distribution of these words suggests a common origin of the languages concerned before they split.

In a number of cases, cognates are shared by Lao, Dehong, and the Northern languages, again with sporadic distribution in certain Central languages such as Nung Fan Slihng.

Gloss	Tone	Lao	Dehong	WT	LM	Nung	Yay	Fengshan
crotch of trousers	<i>B2</i>	<i>huan</i>	<i>hoŋ B1</i>	—	—	—	Wuming <i>ruŋ</i>	<i>luŋ</i>
mix, stir	<i>A1</i>	<i>kɔɔi</i>	<i>kɔi</i>	—	—	—	<i>koy</i>	<i>koi</i>
join, reinforce	<i>C1</i>	<i>kɔɔ</i>	<i>ko</i>	—	—	—	<i>ko</i>	<i>ko</i>
not plump	<i>D2</i>	<i>phɛɛp</i> , <i>pheep</i>	<i>phɔp D1</i>	—	—	<i>paap</i>	<i>paap</i>	<i>paap</i> , <i>pɛɛp</i>
pig's feed	<i>D1</i>	<i>muak</i>	<i>mok D2</i>	—	—	<i>môk</i>	<i>mook</i>	<i>mook</i>
		<i>D2</i>						

Except for 'not plump' and 'pig's feed,' the above words are not found in any other non-Northern dialects in our data. Could it be that Lao got these words from Dehong? Note that 'pig's feed' also occurs in Saek as *mɔɔk*⁶, with tone D1, like other Northern languages. The fact that this item takes tone D2 in Dehong and Lao is itself an indication of the effect of lexical diffusion.

In other cases, Lao and Dehong are joined by White Tai in showing a Southwestern-Northern connection.

Gloss	Tone	Lao	Dehong	WT	LM	Nung	Yay	Fengshan
nicked, chipped	<i>B1</i>	<i>baan</i>	<i>maan</i>	<i>baan</i>	—	—	<i>baan</i>	<i>baan</i>
to bite, crack (seed)	<i>D1</i>	<i>ket</i>	<i>ket</i>	<i>kêt</i>	—	—	Wuming <i>kyat</i>	<i>tɕet</i>
fence, barrier	<i>C1</i>	<i>khaŋ</i>	<i>xaŋ C2</i>	<i>xoŋ</i>	—	—	<i>haŋ</i>	<i>haŋ</i>
look back	<i>D2</i>	<i>ŋvaak</i>	<i>ŋɔk</i>	<i>ŋoak</i>	—	—	<i>ŋuak</i>	<i>ŋɔk</i>
drive, herd (cattle)	<i>A1</i>	<i>?uan</i>	<i>?ɔn</i>	<i>?on</i>	—	—	—	<i>?waan</i>

None of these examples are found in Siamese or other Southwestern dialects in my data. Nor do they occur in any Central languages, indicating their restricted distribution in non-Northern dialects. This seems to suggest a migration movement from the Northern into the Southwestern area. Note that 'female in-law, aunt' is found in Lao, Dehong, White Tai, Black Tai, and the Central languages only, not in the Northern languages.

Gloss	Tone	Lao	Dehong	WT	LM	Nung	Yay	Fengshan
female in-law, aunt	<i>A2</i>	<i>lua</i>	<i>lo</i>	<i>lô BT</i>	<i>luu</i>	<i>lu</i>	—	—
				<i>lua</i>				

The fact that this item is not found in Siamese indicates that it is basically a Central word, which spread into Dehong and Lao, with a change in meaning. The meaning of this word is 'daughter-in-law, sister-in-law' in the Central languages, as in Lungming and Nung. In White Tai, Black Tai, Dehong, and Lao, it means 'father's younger brother's wife,' which may be related to the Northern word *liaw* A2, as in Yay and Fengshan, with the same meaning.

The distribution patterns of words discussed in this section raise important questions for the lexical classification of Tai dialects. How do we account for this phenomenon? What significance is to be given to lexical items of this kind? How do they affect the subgroup structure of the Tai languages? To answer these questions, it seems beneficial to resort to certain historical records.

NORTHWESTERN TAI: SOME POSSIBLE HISTORICAL EXPLANATIONS

If lexical items reflect the migration movements of a cultural group, the above discussion seems to suggest that a group of Northern speakers moved southwards and then northwestwards. Historical sources seem to lend support to our hypothesis.⁵

The Red River basin is believed to be the cultural centre of the early Tai people (Gedney, 1965; Wyatt, 1984). A substantial number of Tai agricultural terms clearly indicate that the Tais were wet-land cultivators (Li, 1977; Luo, 1997a), whose dispersal in the early centuries of the Christian era was caused by the Chinese expansion towards the south. However, historical records show that the most turbulent period for Tai did not start until the Tang and Song dynasties when the Chinese frontier policy had caused huge problems that sparked revolts from the local non-Chinese communities. We are told that in the middle of the Tang Dynasty, a group of Tai speakers in the Zuo and You River basin in Guangxi (referred to as *Xi Yuan Man* or *Huang Dong Man*, literally ‘the barbarians of Xi Yuan’), unable to put up with the burden of heavy taxes, launched a series of attacks against the Tang rulers, which greatly undermined the power of the latter. The rebellion was subsequently put down, but it became a source of inspiration for later revolts (Sima, 1084, section 222.).

An important chapter in Tai history was written by Nong Zhigao,⁶ a cultural hero, in the early Song Dynasty (11th Century AD). A member of the “barbarians of Guangyuan” (i.e., modern Jinxi in Guangxi, a concentration of Zhuang people), Nong Zhigao and his followers launched a fierce uprising against the Chinese and Vietnamese administrations in an attempt to break away from their rules (Ouyang & Tuo, 1345, p. 485). In 1045, Nong Zhigao established an independent state, *Nan Tian Guo* or the Southern Heavenly Kingdom, in his hometown, with his control extended over to the You River Basin soon after. An exchange of attacks took place between the Nong army and the Vietnamese troops, with the Nong men gaining the upper hand, which encouraged them to embark on an northeastern expedition against the Song court. The Nong army conquered Yongzhou, then capital of the local Song administration, before marching towards Guangzhou to begin a two-month siege of the city. Unable to capture Guangzhou, the Nong army had to withdraw to its home base, later only to meet with relentless suppression by the Chinese army in 1053 (Li Y., 1134 pp. 253–255). Nong Zhigao is reported to have fled to Dali in Yunnan (Li T., 1177, sections 168–194). The defeat of the Nong army must have led to great social upheavals among the Tai groups, some of whom presumably left their homeland for the south- and northwest. Historical documents also record migrations of Han and non-Han groups to Yunnan during the Yuan and Ming Dynasties (13th–17th Centuries) (Song, 1370; Zhang, 1739).

We are now in a position to propose a new subgroup in Tai: the Northwestern Branch. This new subgroup is speculated to be a consequence of the southward

⁵ For a summarizing account of Chinese sources in this regard, see Luo (1996, Chap. 2).

⁶ Barlow (1987) offers a detailed description of the Zhuang people in the Song period, which is particularly relevant to our discussion.

movement of some Tai speakers into the upland area of what is now northern Vietnam, perhaps into extreme northeastern Laos, and ultimately into northwestern Yunnan. This group, represented by Dehong in this study, offers some problems for the classification of Tai dialects. Characteristically, this group exhibits a number of vocabulary items in common with the Northern branch but lacking in other Southwestern dialects. On the other hand, it mainly displays the phonological features of Southwestern varieties, but some non-Southwestern phonetic features are also noted. These are highly likely to be residues of some earlier features. Thus, our proposal of the branching structure of Tai may look like the following, if accepted:

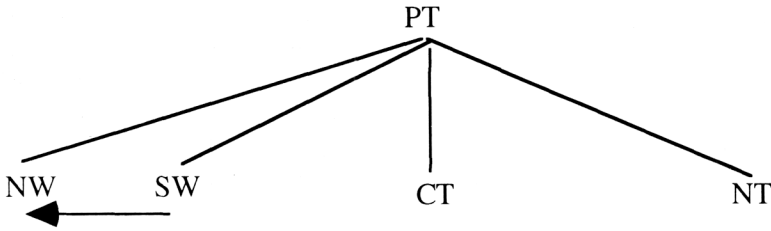


Figure 1. A four-way classification of Tai dialects, based on certain lexical distributions

This Northwestern group may include Northern Shan varieties such as Khamti, and perhaps other Southern Shan varieties in Myanmar as well, which share some common features with Dehong. Given the Chinese records, it is reasonable to imagine that ancestors of this group of speakers migrated first southward from their home base, and then northwestward. Later on, some speakers of the Southwestern group may have pushed north along the Mekong River and mixed with speakers of the Northwestern group. Those speakers then gradually adopted many features of the phonology of the new languages or dialects with which they had subsequent contact, but still retained key vocabulary items of their parent language, more representative of the Northern languages. The arrow indicates such a process.

The purpose of the preceding speculation is not to establish definitively the historical relations of Dehong, but rather to show by way of example that in some cases historical evidence can be in line with findings concerning the distribution of certain lexical items in the Tai dialects. This type of reasoning might explain why a number of important basic cultural words are shared by the Northern dialects and certain Central dialects on the north bank of the Red River, as well as by Dehong, which is geographically far removed from these other groups. It thus seems reasonable to think that such vocabulary items, which do not appear to be shared by other Tai dialects, were traces of a south- and then northwestward migration of a particular group of Proto-Tai speakers whose earlier home was in the Guangxi and Guizhou area. This would lend support to a recent theory of a “language corridor” proposed by Edmondson and Li (1996).

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