EVIDENCE OF THE THAI NOI ALPHABET
FOUND IN INSCRIPTIONS

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This research is a diachronic study of the writing system of the Northeastern Thai dialect. It is based on the analysis of twenty two rubbings of inscriptions. The question of the origin of the Thai Noi alphabet is considered in the light of epigraphic evidence. The phonetic interpretation of some proto-Tai sounds on the basis of historical spelling is suggested. The waxing and waning of vowel length in the Northeastern Thai dialect is observed.

1. Introduction

The earliest known Thai script was invented by King Ramkhamhaeng of Sukhothai Kingdom in 1283 A.D. The Sukhothai script of King Ramkhamhaeng was used till 1357 A.D. In 1357, in the reign of King Li Thai, the grandson of King Ramkhamhaeng, a new script called "King Li Thai Script" came to be used. From my observations it is evident that the shapes of letters of King Li Thai are based on the Sukhothai ones, although some of them are modified. It is stated in Thai history that Ayudhaya city replaced Sukhothai city as the capital of Thailand in 1378. During the early periods of the Ayudhaya kingdom King Li Thai script had been used, though certain changes were introduced through the process of time. In 1680, during the reign of King Narai, the script called "King Narai Script" was brought into use. King Narai script has been developed and preserved as our national script up to now.

The Thai Noi script was used in the Northeastern part of Thailand. The earliest Thai Noi writing was engraved on the Phrathat Sribunruang inscription dated 1510 A.D. Thai Noi was used widely in the Northeast till the Primary School Act was introduced in 1871 A.D. It was stated in this act

that only Standard Thai writing could be used in writing Thai.

2. The Origin of Thai Noi Script

The question of the ultimate source of the Thai Noi script has been debated for many years. According to the work of various scholars, such as Thawat Punnothok and others, the Thai Noi script was developed from King Li Thai script. In this view, King Li Thai, during his reign, made Sukhothai a centre of Buddhism, so that through the spread of Buddhism, King Li Thai script was widely used in Laos and the Northeastern part of Thailand. Later on, this developed into the Thai Noi script. After careful consideration of the shapes of letters in King Li Thai and Thai Noi scripts, I have also reached the conclusion that the source of the Thai Noi script is King Li Thai script.

My observations on the shapes of letters are based on the rubbings of the inscriptions. Of the Thai Noi script, I analyzed twenty two rubbings of inscriptions dated from 1510 - 1840 A.D. From these observations, it is clear that there is great epigraphic similarity among them.

I attempt to show here the similarity of the shapes of letters in King Li Thai and the Thai Noi scripts, by reproducing them side by side. The phonetic value of each symbol of the scripts is that used in the present Thai pronunciation.

1. Consonant Symbols

k	kh		ŋ	tɕ	tɕh	d
King Li Thai Script 1357 A.D.
The Thai Noi Script 1510 A.D.

t	th		n	b	p
King Li Thai Script 1357 A.D.
The Thai Noi Script 1510 A.D.

King Li Thai Script 1357 A.D.

The Thai Noi Script 1510 A.D.

2. Vocalic Symbols

King Li Thai Script 1357 A.D.

The Thai Noi Script 1510 A.D.

	ua	ai	au
King Li Thai Script 1357 A.D.			
The Thai Noi Script 1510 A.D.			

3. Tonal Markers

		+
King Li Thai Script 1357 A.D.		
The Thai Noi Script 1510 A.D.	There were no tonal markers	

2. Northeastern Thai Phonology

The phonology of Northeastern Thai has been studied by various scholars, such as Kalaya Tingsabadh and others. The following is a brief summary.

2.1 The consonant system

p	t	c	k	ʔ
ph	th	ch	kh	
b	d			
m	n	(ɲ)	ŋ	
f	s			h
w	l		y	

All the preceding consonants are permitted as the initial consonant of a syllable. A cluster is not permitted. Only p , t , k , ʔ , m , n, ŋ occur as the final consonant of a syllable.

2.2 The vowel system

2.2.1 Monophthongs

i	ii	ɯ	ɯɯ	u	uu
e	ee	ɤ	ɤɤ	o	oo
ɛ	ɛɛ	a	aa	ɔ	ɔɔ

2.2.2 Diphthongs

ia	(ɯa)	ua

2.3 The tone system

|	A	B	C	DL	DS
1					
2					
3					
4					

3. Simplification of clusters

Clusters are not permitted in present Northeastern Thai dialects. However, consonant sequences are found. We do not know if these consonant sequences were clusters or not. According to Li (1977:83) clusters existed in Proto-Tai and were simplified separately in different dialects. None of the modern dialects preserved all clusters. The ways of writing syllable-initial sequences in Thai Noi script is systematic. The following are examples.

3.1 Writing a part of the second consonant symbol or the whole of it under the first symbol

The way they are pronounced in present Northeastern Thai

< kɾ > < kl > k-

< tɾ > t-

< pɾ > < pl > p-

The way they are pronounced in present Northeastern Thai

〔 script 〕 < phr > 〔 script 〕 < phl >   ph-

< ml > (cluster ml- is preserved   ma-l-
in Wu-ming and Saek)

< hl > (a proto-Tai voiceless   l-
lateral can be seen from
early loanwords from Tai
into Khmu? - Smalley 1961,
cited by Li 1977)

3.2   Writing syllable initial consonant
sequences as ligatures

〔 script 〕 < hn > (a proto-Tai hn appears   n-
in some loanwords in Khmu?
from Lao or Siamese)

〔 script 〕 < hm > (a proto-Tai hm is preserved m-
in some loanwords in Khmu?
from Lao or Siamese)

4. Remarks on vowel length distinction in ancient
Thai.

The short vowels /e/, /ɛ/, /ɔ/, /o/,
/ɤ/ occur in the present Northeastern Thai
pronunciation, but the vocalic symbols used to
represent these short vowels were not found in the
Thai Noi script. Another interesting thing I found
in the Thai Noi script is that short and long
vocalic symbols are used interchangeably. For
example, words pronounced with a short vowel in the
present Northeastern Thai were written in Thai Noi
script with either a short or long vocalic symbol;
and words pronounced with a long vowel in the
present Northeastern Thai were written in Thai Noi
script with either a short or long vocalic symbol.
This is very interesting because vowel length
distinction is phonemic in present day Northeastern
Thai. Although in running connected speech long
vowels become short, in citation or a careful style

of speech this length distinction is always
preserved.

Examples: (tone is not indicated)

< naɾok >   **was written with**   < a >   **or**   < aː >

< tiːn   >   **was written with**   < i >   **or**   < iː >

< din   >   **was written with**   < ɪ >   **or**   < ɪː >

< phuː   >   **was written with**   < u >   **or**   < uː >

< tɤuː   >   **was written with**   < ʋ >   **or**   < ʋː >

< mɯ ː   >   **was written with**   < ɯ >   **or**   < ɯː >

The evidence provided by the ancient Thai Noi
script leads me to think whether vowel length
distinction was really phonemic in ancient Thai,
because if it were, short and long vocalic symbols
should not have been used interchangeably in the
writing system which represents speech in citation
form.

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