

The Kam in Ancient Times

Quan Yang

Jerold A. Edmondson

Central University of Nationalities, Beijing

University of Texas at Arlington

1. THE GEOGRAPHIC AND CULTURAL SETTING

Kam is the largest language of the Kam-Sui linguistic branch, a lesser-known sister branch to the Tai Branch, of which Thai is the largest member. Beyond Kam, the Kam-Sui languages include Sui, Mulam, Maonan, Then, Mak, Ai-Cham, and Grass Hmong; essentially all the Kam-Sui peoples live in China. These languages might seem a trifle removed from the locus of research done by Acham Vichin Panupong—whom we honor with this volume. Nevertheless, some archeological studies have recently suggested the original homeland of the Thai might have been in Guangxi Province in a location close to where the Kam may once have lived (Vallibhotama, 1993). We feel therefore that this modest contribution about some of the distant cousins of the Thai might be of the interest to Acham Vichin and other Taiists in searching for linguistic and cultural roots.

The Kam call themselves *kəm*⁵⁵ and they are called Dòng 侗 [tuŋV] by the Han (Chinese) people. The Kam until recently possessed no written tradition of their own. Moreover, mention of the Kam in Han records has been relatively infrequent. Therefore, the most enlightening sources of information about times past are to be sought mostly in the Kam language, religion, myths, stories, oral history, and ethnology. This essay probes these materials to study the origins of the Kam.

The Kam are distributed over Guizhou, Hunan, Guangxi, and Hubei Provinces (total population of 2,514,014 according to the 1990 census). They are said to be the descendants of an ancient group of people Chinese historians called *Geling* 猺伶, as reported in AD 1171 by the *Songshi*: *Xinan Xi-dong Zhuman* [History of the Song: The assorted barbarians of the SW Stream-Mountain Area]. The *Xidong* area was depicted as mountainous turf (*dong*) with interspersed rice paddies and many small streams (*xi*); thus the name *xi* and *dong*. The original *Xidong* territory is today a part of Guizhou Province including some neighboring land from Hunan and Guangxi. The largest number of Kam are located in Guizhou Province, about 1.4 million. The most concentrated site of their population in Guizhou is found in SE Guizhou Miao-Kam Autonomous Prefecture in the following places: Liping, Congjiang, Rongjiang, Tianzhu, Jingping, Jianhe, Sansui, Zhenyuan, and Tongren Counties. In Hunan Province their population amounts to 770,000 where they live at Tongdao, Xinghuang, and Zhijiang, as well as in Jinzhou Miao-Kam Autonomous County. In Guangxi-Zhuang Autonomous Region their population numbers 400,000 and they inhabit the areas in Sanjiang, Longsheng, Rongshui, and Luocheng Counties. Some centuries ago a group of Kam immigrated to Hubei. The Kam there are found at Enshi and Xuan'en Counties, a total of only about 40,000 people.

Until two years ago it was not known to many outside Vietnam that some Kam left China and settled south of the border. A few settlers apparently accompanied the Yao from the Guizhou-Guangxi border areas into northern Vietnam. This outward movement happened at the end of the 18th or the beginning of the 19th centuries.

Vietnamese sources use the Han-Viet name **Tống** or **Đồng** in referring to them, cf. **Hoàng Văn Ma** and **Vũ Bá Hùng** (1992, p.143) and Fan Honggui, Meng Weiren, Xu Quanyin, and Gu Shaosong (1986). Professor **Hoàng Văn Ma** of the Linguistics Institute of the Institute of Social Sciences of Vietnam has told us that today the Kam live with their Yao relatives in Tuyên Quang Province near **Sơn Dương** in a village where he studied their language ten years ago and a small number of older people speak it yet today. From examples of their speech gathered in October 1995 (*vi*² 'buffalo'; *mən*¹ 'sky'; *pja*¹ 'rock, stone'; *məm*⁴ 'tiger') and from the fact that these Kam accompanied the Yao to Vietnam and now intermarry with them, we now know that they originally came from Congjiang/Liping Counties, Guizhou or from Sanjiang County in Guangxi Province, where the Pa-hng are concentrated.

In Guizhou the Kam inhabit two settlement areas that are separated by other nationalities called the *northern settlement area* and the *southern settlement area*. The southern area is more preservative of traditional life style. There are also some differences of language and customs, but these are not so great as to prevent a strong sense of common ethnic identity and ready communication. In the southern areas it is quite usual for Kam women to wear their daily dress of indigo blue/black dyed cotton.

The Kam belong to the Kam-Tai or Kadai Branch of languages (Li, 1965). They have had contact over the centuries with the Han, the Miao, the Zhuang, the Yao, the Sui, the Mulam, the Maonan, and the Gelao. Some of this interaction, while of ancient origin, was interrupted when the groups settled in different geographic areas; some of it has been continuous since Tang times (8th c.). This situation has beclouded the original patterns of linguistic affiliation, while false connections among groups have been suggested from repeated and multilevel linguistic and cultural borrowings. Chinese scholars, who have been skeptical about the link between Tai, Kam-Sui, and Gelao, may be beginning to give serious consideration to such a connection, for example Liang (1990) and Long Yaohong (1992).

The Kam people are engaged principally in farming and in wood cutting. Both these activities have achieved a very high level of development. The Kam are particularly known for their cultivation of glutinous rice and for wood construction. The role of glutinous rice in their culture and history is of cardinal importance, as it provides them not only their principle dietary staple, it also serves as a symbol of the Kam themselves. Glutinous rice is called *qou*³¹ *kəm*⁵⁵ 'Kam rice' or *qou*³¹ *lai*⁵⁵ 'good rice' in their language and is to be contrasted with non-glutinous rice, which is called *qou*³¹ *ka*³¹ 'Han (Chinese) rice.' However, the harvest of glutinous rice is not sufficiently abundant to satisfy all their needs and therefore both kinds of rice must be cultivated today.

The Kam areas are one of China's eight forested territories, and many kinds of wood products figure into their lives. Of paramount importance is the Chinese fir, which grows rather rapidly and is quite tall and straight, producing superior timber for house construction. Over the centuries the Kam have employed wood to erect two of their most distinctive cultural features, the drum tower and the wind-rain bridge. These, like their houses, are erected on stilts with the occupied parts found on the second story and higher. This practice is an inheritance from the ancient Yue *ganlan* house type.¹ It

¹In regard to dwellings, the successors to the Yue, the Liao (Lao) 獠 namely, said they remembered that the Yue first lived in caves. But caves were unsuitable dwellings during floods and

is the practice of the Kam that Chinese fir trees are planted on the occasion of the birth of a girl so that the trees and the child reach maturity simultaneously at 18 years, when the wood will be needed as a dowry.

The Kam village consists typically of 20-30 households surrounded by a stockade or natural ramparts. The largest villages may have as many as 500-600 households. The town of Rongjiang in Guizhou's SE Miao-Kam Autonomous Prefecture has several thousand households and is the largest settlement. In each of these villages in the southern area there is at least one drum tower; some may have more. The drum tower is one of the two unique features of a Kam village. It is the center of community life, a gathering point, and a determiner of marriageable partners, since everyone in a village may have the same last name; being tied to different drum towers is a convenient way of keeping clans separated. The drum tower is erected by the efforts of the entire village. In the Kam language it is called *peŋ*³²³. It is also a place for rest and recreation, for the singing of Kam and clan history, for telling stories, for teaching the young, and for doing trade.

The wind-rain bridge is the other distinctive cultural aspect of the village. The Kam settle on small rivers or streams and bridges are therefore a necessity. Needing access to both sides of the water, they began constructing bridges, but today the cultural and artistic significance of such bridges rivals any practical value, as they use them for meeting places and to house the river spirits. The famous bridge at Chengyang in Guangxi just south of the Guizhou border is over 100 meters long and has been declared a national cultural treasure by the Chinese government.

Among the other characteristics of the Kam are their songs and the bronze drum. The Kam are known for their singing, especially their choral singing in harmony. *These songs, when performed by women, are typically sung while clasp[ing] hands in a line or circle and swinging them to and fro or, when performed by men, by standing front-to-back in a circle and placing the right hand on the shoulder of the man in front; one then marches in a circle while singing.* In the Song Dynasty there are reports of these practices among the Geling 犵伶 and Gelam 犵覽 in a work by Lu You 陸游 entitled *Laoxue'an biji* 老學庵筆記 [Records of the Laoxue'an]. Songs are used in courting, working, and recounting history.

The Kam are also among the bronze drum cultures of East Asia, as are the Thai, Lao, Vietnamese, Zhuang, Bouyei, Sui, Miao, Yao, and others (Beauclair, 1986b). The great geographic expanse, the dating of the finds, as well as the artistic inscriptions on excavated drums attest the importance and antiquity of these impressive artifacts. The drums are used today for entertainment, but there are indications that they once figured into rites and ceremonies. The usual Kam word for bronze drum today has

were often infested with snakes and vermin. So in time, the Yue changed to living in trees. Trees were better as refuges from water and bugs, but the sites of large trees could not be chosen by the owner, and villages or groups of houses were not practical. Nevertheless, a Yue inventor incorporated the character of trees in his design of a dwelling on piles one story tall. One house in the Hemudi culture (4th-5th millennium BC) was reconstructed as having piles, cf. Chang (1986, p. 209). We are today familiar with this kind of house so characteristic of the Tai and Kam-Sui people. The word for this house design is also from the Yue, namely *Ganlan*. Note that 欄 *lan* resembles fairly closely *-lan*. In other languages there are similar forms: Kam *yuan*, Zhuang *ruan/luan*, etc. The *Ganlan* house style is found today among the Thai, Zhuang, Kam, and Sui as well as among other related groups.

been borrowed from the Han language, *toŋ¹¹ku³³*, but in Guangxi Rongshui Pingdong we recorded the word *jan¹¹*, which must represent a very archaic level of the Kam lexicon and which ties the Kam to an ancient practice.

2. THE AUTONYM

Although the general name used by the Kam to refer to themselves is *kəm⁵⁵*, one also finds *kən¹*, or *kjəm⁵⁵*. When they wish to specify the Kam people, they add *la:k³¹* or *jin¹¹*. Thus, they call themselves *la:k³¹kəm⁵⁵* or *jin¹¹kəm⁵⁵* or even *la:k³¹jin¹¹kəm⁵⁵*. *La:k³¹*, which is cognate with Thai *lûuk*, means 'offspring, descendants.' Using the term "offspring" to denote the entirety of an ethnic group, both the quick and the dead, is a common practice among other Kam-Tai groups. For example, the Lachi of Yunnan Province in China and in Vietnam call themselves *li³⁵po³³*, in which *li³⁵* is also cognate with Kam *la:k* and Thai *lûuk*; thus, the Lachi are the "children of the Po," who were another ancient people of the area.

To the outside the Kam call themselves *Kam*, but within Kam territory and society there are many branches and clans where different ways of speaking of themselves are heard. The most important of these are *kəm⁵⁵lau³¹* 'Old Kam', *kəm⁵⁵tan³¹* 'Tan Kam,' and *kəm⁵⁵tau³¹* 'Jao Kam.' The attributive modifier dividing the various subbranches is always an item in tone 4 (31) or tone 10 (31) in dead syllables, *lau³¹/tau³¹/fan³¹*.² The fourth tone is also the tone of direct descendant kinship names *pu³¹* 'father,' *nai³¹* 'mother,' *tai³¹* 'older sibling,' *noŋ³¹* 'younger sibling,' *pai³¹* 'older sister,' *la:k³¹* 'child,' *sa³¹* 'grandmother.' The tonal system of Kam is highly developed with nine tone contrasts in live syllables and six in dead syllables; nine categories according to the Thai model and fifteen tones according to the Chinese way of reckoning. The Kam are, from the tonal complexity of their language, extraordinarily sensitive to the slightest difference of pitch. Thus, it cannot be accidental that the various subdivisions of the Kam and kinship names are all words of tone four, *kəm⁵⁵lau³¹*, *kəm⁵⁵tan³¹*, and *kəm⁵⁵tao³¹*.

What is then the meaning of Kam? It can be either a noun or a verb. As a noun, it refers to the Kam nationality or it can signify: *tu¹kəm¹* 'indigo'; *tau¹kəm¹* 'a kind of ivy'; *naŋ²kəm¹* 'a kind of bamboo shoot'; *pən¹kəm¹* 'a kind of bamboo.' When used as a verb, it represents 'to fence, to block something' as: *kəm¹tam¹* 'to cover a fish pond (using branches)'; *kəm¹pa¹* 'to use branches to form a fish blind'; *kəm¹khwən¹* 'block at the village entrance'; *kəm¹ca:⁶* 'to fence in a village'; *kəm¹ja:n¹* 'to make a fence for a vegetable garden'; *kəm¹ta:m²* 'to make a fence.'

From these meanings we may not readily see the connection between the autonym and the sense of 'to block, to fence.' But if one knows Kam customs and practices,

²Tone category 4 in the system of William J. Gedney (1972) is the tone found in the box C4 or in the system of Li Fang Kuei (1977) C2; tone 10 corresponds to Gedney's DL4 and Li's DL2.

then the connection can be discovered. The Kam prefer to settle on stream banks to form villages. The best setting is a stream surrounded by mountains with a narrow path for an entrance. This practice must go back to ancient times as during the Song Dynasty there is a description that the farm land of the Kam was wide with much glutinous rice, but the villages had only one entrance. This is then the meaning of *kəm*¹. The original meaning of *Kam* is 'those people living in a closed area, being fenced in the sense of surrounded by natural protection.'

It is also likely that the designation *Kam* for those minority groups living on the SE borders of Guizhou Province with Hunan and Guangxi Provinces was generalized and came in time to refer to Guizhou Province as a whole. The provinces of South China have modern names such as *Guangdong*, *Guangxi*, *Hunan*, and *Sichuan*, but they also have older, traditional names. So, for example, Guangdong is *Yue*, Guangxi is *Gui*, Hunan is *Xiang*, and Sichuan is *Chuan*. Guizhou Province is traditionally called *Qian* [tɕien⁴]. In Tang/Song this entire territory belongs to one administrative area; it was first called *Xidong*. Later, the Chinese character used to describe this area was 黔 *Qian*, which in ancient times was pronounced *ǵiəm* (Guo, 1986, p. 206). It is easy to see a strong phonological resemblance between *ǵiəm* and *gelam* and then *kəm*⁵⁵. It is also noteworthy that this character employs the radical 黑 meaning 'black,' and indeed the entire character *qian* means 'black,' in addition to being the ancient name for Guizhou, which may have been suggested by the indigo blue/black dyeing of Kam clothing.

Very strong evidence in support of the idea that the autonym *Kam* means 'an enclosed inhabited area' comes from the Hlai of Hainan Island. The Hlai cognate of *Kam* is *kon*¹ and means 'place'; in fact the meaning is 'the place where people live and labor together.' Every *Kon*¹ has its own territory. The *Kon*¹ usually has mountains or rivers as boundaries. There is a difference between small and large areas. A chief is called *Vau Kon*. At first *kon*¹ was used to indicate a territory. Later this term was used to express a system of blood relation.

As we stated at the beginning of this essay, the Kam are called *Dong* by the Chinese. In fact, the character 洞 used to refer to them today employs the person radical, but the choice of name has changed considerably over time. They have been called: *Dong Ren*, *Dong Man*, *Dong Miao*, *Dong Yao*, *Dong Ming*, *Dong Min*, *Dong Liao*, and *Dong Jia Shou*. In the Song Dynasty they were also referred to as the *Geling* or the *Gelam*. The characters often varied with the radical in the character fluctuating among: dog (which was a contemptuous practice widely used to indicate the status of all the non-Han minorities in Han eyes), stone, mountain, water, indicating their natural habitat. The forms with mountain radical 山 are first found in the Tang Dynasty. This radical may be suggesting that the Kam once lived in caves, but more likely it refers to the custom of choosing a valley surrounded by mountains on all sides with only a single entry through a narrow aperture (hole in the mountains), a setting that is perfectly exemplified by the Kam village at Pingdong in Rongshui County, Guangxi Province. We may suppose that local officials were trying to convey to a distant emperor the most impressive feature of a people in only intermittent contact with the Chinese. Frequent exchanges began not earlier than the Song Dynasty A.D. 960, when mention of the Kam/Dong became much more common. From then on,

Kam/Dong just became an ethnonym for some of the Emperor's non-Han subjects. What is then the connection between Dong and Kam? Originally, Dong meant 'hole, cave' but has shifted its interpretation to mean a village setting. Kam also had the sense of a small basin surrounded by mountains with a small stream. So these two were nearly synonymous.

The term of self-reference *Kam* has connections not only with the meaning but also with the sound of *Dong*. As we noted at the beginning, the ancient territory of the *Gelam* and *Geling* was called *Xi Dong Xi Nan*. But, *Xi Dong* may be nothing more than a Kam application of *fanqie* spelling, a Chinese lexicographical tradition that glossed unfamiliar words by using two Chinese characters of common usage, the first glossed the syllable onset and the second character the remainder of the syllable. Thus, the Kam word for brook is *k'ui*³ and cave is *təm*². If one employs the traditional rules, the Kam are known to have in the past used Chinese characters to render Kam words, then these two yield *k'ui*³+*təm*² = *kəm*. Generally, the transcription of tone and aspiration is not always attended to.

From the references to *Gelam* and *Geling*, it is virtually certain that in these times the Kam autonym began with a cluster *klam*¹ that later changed to *kəm*¹, *kjəm*¹, *ləm*¹, or *təm*¹. The old clusters of Kam-Sui and Tai are *kl-/pl-/ml-* and these in time become *k-/p-/m-*. The development of a form *lam*¹ would also fit a well attested process in Kam-Sui (Edmondson & Yang, 1994), in which the first of two syllables drops even though the tone may reflect the original now deleted initial. Another example supportive of that view is a group closely related to the Kam, the Mulam, who call themselves *mlam*¹. Yet another example is the name for an area in southern Rongshui County, Guangxi in which the speakers call their home territory *Kelam*.

Thus, the evidence suggests that all the names for the Kam are descended from a single source and that the parent form *kelam* was still in use in Tang times. Originally, the term referred to the special protected physical location that the ancient Kam sought out to establish their ordered world. This designation was rendered in the Han language by using a Chinese character with a radical suggestive of the features of their villages and a sound that—for those that knew the Kam language—would also help gloss the Kam name for themselves.

3. ORIGINAL HOMELANDS OF THE KAM

Having made our suggestion for the meaning of the name Kam, we now turn to another foundational question about the Kam. What is their original homeland? While definitive solutions to this question may not be completely unassailable, one can, nevertheless, make a number of plausible inferences about the original homeland of the Kam. First, consider the patterns of their migration. The migration experience must have involved periods of stability and consolidation with other groups and periods of movement and separation. The Kam are surely a composite of several peoples, perhaps being a heterogeneous mixture of the Yue from the beginning, in addition to absorbing other ethnicities over the long course of their movements and after they arrived.

In the history of the Kam we believe there have been two great migrations. The first of these occurred before or during the Qin Dynasty, 221–207 B.C. Chroniclers say that in the Warring States Period two of the non-Han states warred and Chu defeated Yue.

As a result, some Kam precursors moved southwest to settle in the areas of Tianzhu, E. Guizhou, and S.W. Hunan, and into the area of northern Kam settlement today. Soon thereafter Emperor Qin Shihuang dispatched his general, Zhao Tuo, with an army of half a million from Sichuan to conquer the South. Thus, many Yue immigrated from Jiangxi to Hunan over Dongting Hu along the Yuan Jiang and the Zi Shui rivers to the Beidong area. There they joined that part of the Kam ancestors who had come earlier.

The second great migration occurred during the Tang/Song 800 years later, the 7th century A.D., according to an old Kam song *Zu Gong Shang He*. The Kam came west from Lingnam, the area roughly corresponding to Guangdong and Guangxi Provinces, by following the Xi Jiang (West River) to Wuzhou just inside the Guangxi border. From there they turned northward along the course of the Liu Jiang, Xun Jiang, and Duluo Jiang rivers, going to their head waters to arrive at their current locations in Guizhou, Hunan, and Guangxi. Wuzhou and the Xi Jiang play a crucial role in this wandering of peoples. There are more than 20 ancient songs describing the migrations of the Kam ancestors. Of these 13 mention Wuzhou as source or as intermediate stop on the trek from Jiangxi Province (Fan, 1993). They describe how the Kam came from Wuzhou to Guizhou Province. Six songs say the Kam first lived in Jiangxi Province at a place called Jie'an Fu. They set out from there traveling over Wuzhou to Guizhou.

There are two other groups that seem to have accompanied the Kam on this journey, the Lakkja, now found in Jinxiu Yao Autonomous County, and the Biao, a nearly assimilated group of 200,000 found in Guangdong Province north of Wuzhou next to the Guangxi border. The Kam tell the story that the Lakkja were to follow them as the two groups went north from Wuzhou. The trail markers left at the river fork by the Kam were washed away in an unexpected flood and the Lakkja turned too soon to the west and, as a result, settled further south in Guangxi Province at Jinxiu. The Biao have been studied linguistically by Zhang Junru (1989). She found linguistic data to suggest that the Biao lie about in the middle ground among Zhuang, Kam, and Lakkja. Another study of the customs and practices by Zhang Souqi and Huang Xinmei (1993) found that the Biao also have the custom of constructing wind-rain bridges, otherwise found only among the Kam, and thus if we take credence from this cultural commonality, we would account the Biao to be fellow travelers with the Kam. The Biao and Lakkja live much closer to Wuzhou today and are a possible link to this auspicious location where the road turned north. Wuzhou in 621 AD was a commandarie (Zhou) in the Chinese system of administration. Wuzhou in the Kam language is called *nu*², which in the Middle Chinese of the *Guangyun* is *wu* according to the *fanqie*. The second migration resulted in the southern Kam.

We can also use place names, stories, etc. to ascertain where a people may have lived before the migration. One of the most informative of these in the case of the Kam is the traditional holiday *Chi Xing Jie*, in Kam *kəu'mər*⁵. It is the time of celebrating in both the northern and southern settlement areas the first rice of the new season. Interestingly, it is not observed in an identical manner in the two places, and details of activities are not the same. In both places, nevertheless, there is the custom of combining unripe rice with fish and shrimp. This mixture is wrapped in tree leaves to venerate ancestors who died as a consequence of the migration, since upon their arrival in these new areas, the rice harvest was not yet ripe and there was not enough food and no salt. The time of this celebration is to correspond to the time the rice had ripened in their old homeland. The reason for celebrating at different times in the north and in the south is because the original immigration took place from different places. The

southern Kam ancestors must have lived in a place in which the rice ripened in early July (lunar), with a celebration immediately thereafter. In their current habitation the rice is not ripe in July but only in September, about six weeks to two months later. Thus we can tell that the ancestors of the Kam lived in an area where the rice was ripe in early July and those areas are found in the more southerly, coastal climes of Zhejiang, Fujian, Guangdong, or Jiangxi.

In ancient songs the Kam speak of a custom called *zhaimen chayang* 'Insert willow branches at the village gate.' Today this celebration is no longer performed. In the ancient homelands of the Baiyue during incantations for rain, willow branches were held or inserted into gates as symbols of rain or ways of chasing away evil. In Zhejiang in some places this custom is still practiced. Perhaps this is an old Yue custom.

From funeral rites one can also see traces of Kam origins. When someone dies, the survivors go immediately to bring clean water from the river to wash the body. This way the soul can find its way downstream to join its ancestors. Otherwise the soul will become lost and be transformed into a wandering spirit. The Kam believe that their ancestors are all gathered downstream in a great water. All these indications speak for a homeland that we would calculate to be in the delta lands of the Pearl River, i.e., Guangdong-Zhejiang.

Yet another piece of evidence favoring a Kam homeland in Lingnam is the custom of the *sa*⁴. The Kam spirit, the *sa*⁴ 'grandmother,' is also called *sa*⁴*mak*⁹, *sa*⁴*lau*⁴, or *sa*⁴*si*³ meaning 'Old or Great Grandmother.' The *sa*⁴ is the Kam's most important deity. Every year there are activities in her honor hosted by the older people of the village. One of the incantations is "We invite the *sa*⁴ from six directions; but the *sa*⁴ doesn't come; we invite the *sa*⁴ from the south and she comes." This supports that claim that the original movement to this place (current homelands) was from the south. In Guangdong Province there is a place called *Jinxia*. This place name is originally a Kam place name now recorded in Chinese characters as *jīn*⁶*sa*⁴ 'palace of the *sa*⁴.' There are also traces of the ancient Yue belief in the *sa*⁴ deity of Lingnam (Guangzhou). According to the ancient Kam song "Song of the *sa*⁴," the *sa*⁴ was brought over from Lingnam Danyang Zhou 7000 li to the Kam. Recently, a handwritten book about *sa*⁴ entitled *Dongshu Xiaogui* has been found. It dates from the Ming dynasty about 400 years ago. It describes the life of *sa*⁴, her activities, and her successes in war. She perhaps stemmed from a place called Yizhou or Yangzhou. These locations are found in Zhejiang Province on the border with Jiangsu.

Folk literature also suggests a southern origin for the Kam. A traditional fable says that rice and seeds of the Chinese fir all come from the South Sea. The tale speaks about the rice seed being brought from the south by dogs and frogs amid many adventures. Therefore, in some places when the new crop of rice is first eaten, the dogs are invited to take the first bite in a gesture of appreciation. In a similar vein the Kam generally do not kill leeches that get attached to them in the paddies, as the leech was also involved in one crucial episode of the rice fable.

Another story speaks of a swallow bringing the Chinese fir seeds. The swallow brought them through storms sent by the Thunder God and through impenetrable forest, allowing the Kam to build houses of the fir tree. Thus every spring little swallow nests of fir bark are constructed to acknowledge a debt incurred centuries ago.

4. THE ANCIENT KAM LANGUAGE

The Kam are descended from the ancient Yue people, who occupied South China about 2500 years ago. The line of descent is thought to be *Yue—L(i)ao—Kam, Thai, Zhuang, Lao, Tày, Nùng*, etc. There is one and only one example of the Yue parent language, the *Yue-Ren-Ge* [Song of the Yue Boatman]. It was recorded during the reign of the Han Dynasty by the scholar Liu Xiang in the *Shuo-Yuan* in the *Shan Shuo* Chapter. The *Yue-Ren-Ge* has since 1980 been the subject of intensive research in China. Chinese characters, when given Old Chinese pronunciation, record rhymed verse in the Yue language. While known about for centuries, it is only recently that the text has been deciphered. The substance and interpretation is most conveniently accessed in Zhengzhang (1991). The main content of the song is: (1) I am rowing with the prince at night; (2) I am shy; and (3) I am pleased to know the prince and I like him secretly.

In 1981 Wei Qingwen (cited in Zhengzhang, 1981) suggested using the sound values of Old Chinese for the characters and the meaning of these sounds according to modern Zhuang. This stroke of insight proved to be the key. Similarities between the language of the *Yue-Ren-Ge* and contemporary Tai/Kam-Sui languages is unmistakable. To demonstrate that connection one may, following Zhengzhang, use modern Thai (in transcription) for comparison.³ We give a few illustrations of this (tones omitted):

Table 1: *Vocabulary from the Ye-Ren-Ge*

Thai	Old Chinese sound values	Meaning
(with voicing in low tones)		
glam	figraam	evening
bluuun	bron	joyful, raptured
raa	la	we
cœeu	tju	to row
juuun	jen	slowly
cau	tjau	prince
daan	daan	your excellency
ruu	lo	to know
cau	dje?	heart

The interpretation of the *Yue-Ren-Ge* is complex, requiring expertise in Old Chinese reconstruction. Despite these technical difficulties, it has probably put to rest any lingering doubt that some of the Yue must have spoken a language antecedent to Tai and/or Kam-Sui. It is in this sense that Kadai philologists can be said to have

³Zhengzhang does not explain why the Thai forms for ‘evening’ and ‘joyful’ have no medial *-l-* in the contemporary writing system.

gained an equivalent to the Germanic *Merseburger Charms* or the *Hildebrandslied*, concrete evidence of the nature of the ancient language.⁴

There is yet another piece of documentary evidence we wish to present here. It involves the language of the Liao. The Liao were the successors to some groups of the Yue. The Liao seem to have arisen in the Han Dynasty (116 BC) in Guizhou, Hunan, and Guangxi Provinces. They figured prominently in all Chinese histories of the area from this time up to the Tang, usually being afforded a separate chapter. In the Jin Dynasty (A.D. 265–420) they are found in profusion in Sichuan, entering that territory from the southeast and driving out the inhabitants. The Liao reached the pinnacle of their power in Liang times, when the Han administrators in Shu (today's west central Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou) had to fight with them virtually every year. By 525 A.D., it is said that 200,000 Liao families were paying tribute to the emperor. Some originally equated these people with the Yi (Lolo), but the cultural descriptions do not support this interpretation, nor does the extent of their settlement. We do not have extensive descriptions of the Liao in fourth century Guizhou, but we do have information about them in Sichuan in the 4th century. The *Hua Yang Guo Zhi* (A.D. 317–420) states that before 344 A.D. there were no Liao in Sichuan. But in that year they descended upon Sichuan in great numbers, 100,000, and could not be overwhelmed. The Liao were settled with another group called the Po (Beauclair, 1986a).

The Liao are mentioned in Chinese annals from The *Guangxi Tongzhi* [Guangxi Communications], the *Qingyuan Fuzhu* [Qingyuan Governmental Reports] from the Qing Dynasty (A.D. 1644–1911), but this document is presumably a copy from an earlier time. It transcribes seven items in the ancient language of the Liao, using Chinese characters. The Liao were one of the groups that evolved from the Yue (*Baiyue* or Hundred Yue). In Table 2 we have given the seven words in Chinese characters, the meanings in English, the sound value in Liao in Chinese characters with the pronunciation in contemporary MSC (Modern Standard Chinese), and the sound value in Kam (Rongjiang).

Some obvious properties of these few words are that the language seems very close to modern Kam. For example, 'mother' is *nai*³¹, 'meat' is *nan*⁵³, 'rice' is *kou*³¹, 'spirits' is *khwao*¹³, which are virtually identical in modern Kam and are quite different in most other Kam-Sui and Tai languages. In regard to initials and tones, Chinese characters were picked whose sound values suggest that the Second Tone Split, a sound change that led to the Rising Tone Set of Kam (cf. Edmondson & Yang, 1988), had already taken place, since the Chinese character used for 'younger brother,' 'rice,' and 'mother' has a different tonal value from that used for 'spirits'; these would have had the same tone before the split and different tones after the split.

⁴These two monuments are among the first documents in the Old High German language. They not only establish the beginning of a tradition but they also have demonstrated a great deal about the language and culture at this early period. As here, there are considerable technicalities in their interpretation.

Table 2: *Liao vocabulary*

Han	Gloss	Liao	Kam
父	father	爸 [pa]	pu ³¹
母	mother	奶 [nai ³⁵]	nai ³¹
弟	younger brother	濃 [noŋ ³⁵]	noŋ ³¹
穿衣	wear clothes	登谷 [təŋ ⁵⁵ kuk ⁵⁵]	tən ³²³ kuk ³²³
吃飯	to eat rice	餵夠 [tɕan ⁵⁵ kou ⁵¹]	tɕan ⁵⁵ qou ³¹
食肉	to eat meat	餵難 [tɕan ⁵⁵ nan ³⁵]	tɕan ⁵⁵ nan ⁵³
吃 ^a	to drink spirits	餵考 [tɕan ⁵⁵ khao ³²³]	tɕan ⁵⁵ khwao ¹³

The question is then, if this language is Kam, why is it labeled “Liao”? The answer is, we believe, simply that many centuries may elapse before an old name—the autonym of the parent group—falls into complete disuse and is forgotten. The Kam are descended from the Liao, and it was first in the Tang/Song that the various subgroups were described and mentioned as distinct, separate groups. Those were the Ge-lam and Ge-ling in Kam areas and the Ge-lao and Ge-tou in other parts of Guizhou Province. However, the designation Liao for all these peoples continued to be used for centuries in some documents, even if the division into separate nationalities had taken place.

It is important that language data bearing the name Liao exist. These data link the Kam to this group and suggest that the Kam developed as a separate nationality between 200 B.C. and 600 A.D. This time frame is also that suggested by Vallibhotama (1993) as that of the second migration of the Thai precursors from Guangxi Province into SE Asia. There is much yet to learn here about all these wanderings and their causes. And particularly, one needs to study whether there is a connection between these two events.

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