The Origin of the T'ai Peoples Reconsidered

by B. J. Terwiel
(Canberra)

The aim of this essay is threefold. In the first place it describes several widely held beliefs about the possible homeland of the T'ai peoples and assesses the evidence upon which these beliefs are founded. Secondly, it provides an inventory of many of the latest finds which may have bearing on this question, and indicates areas where further research is needed. Thirdly, it argues that the comparison of a range of T'ai rituals is a means of reconstructing proto-T'ai culture, and it suggests that such a reconstruction could provide an important link between history and archaeology. Finally there are attached some speculations on a possible link between the Dong-Son culture and that of the T'ais.

I. Legends and theories concerning a T'ai homeland

a) Mongolia

On the 27th of August 1977, some 500 farmers were gathered in the big meeting hall of the Monastery of the Floating Island in Ratchaburi province, central Thailand. These 500 formed one of Ratchaburi's 44 groups of luugsya chaawbaan, or village scouts. It was the second day of their five-day intensive training programme, during which they were admonished to love and respect the nation, religion and the king. On this second day, late in the afternoon a lecture on the origin of the T'ais was delivered by one of the organisers of the retreat.

Several maps, especially printed for this lecture, demonstrated in bright colours the various stages of the long trek of the T'ai peoples. It seems likely that this lecture was part of the standard programme offered to the luugsya chaawbaan. In that case it has been estimated that in 1977 alone, approximately one million Thai farmers heard the legend, which covered the following points:

Originally, some 7,000 years ago, the T'ais lived at the foot of the Altai mountains in central Mongolia. It is clear from Chinese annals that the T'ais started moving southwards, first through the Gobi desert to what is now northwestern China and from there southwards in various groups searching for a place where they could set up their own free country. (The word thaj in such lectures is invariably equated with "freedom"). Finally they settled down in western Yunnan around lake Tali where they founded the famous Nanchao kingdom. For many centuries the T'ai kingdom was independent from China. In 1796 B. E. (1253 A. D.) it was conquered by the fierce Kublai Khan. The freedom loving T'ais could not tolerate Chinese oppression and began moving further southwards into the regions of upper Burma and what is now northern Tailand. There they founded the kingdom of Sukhothai which had its headquarters in present day Thailand.

During this account of the early history of the T'ais the speakers described the immense size of the Sukhothai realm and how it was only during the last hundred years that the country had shrunk to its present size. All Thai farmers were urged to do their best to preserve and develop a glorious Thailand. The lecture was obviously intended to instil pride in past achievements and to foster patriotism. It was part of a nation-wide effort to win the rural people's hearts in the Thai government's fight against communism and it
was typical of the style of Thanin Kraivixien's leadership during 1976 and 1977. For the purpose of this essay, the account only serves to demonstrate that there exists a legend about the origin of the T'ai peoples which is officially endorsed and which has become widely accepted. In this legend the T'ai moved thousands of miles from central Mongolia to Eastern Yunnan before arriving in their present location.

It would be wrong, however, to surmise that this legend was created in order to foster nationalistic feelings amongst village scouts. The legend has been part of the ordinary school curriculum for decades. Sem Pring-Puang-Geo remembers that the Altai mountain story was taught to him when he was a schoolboy some fifty years ago. Common textbooks on Thai history relate the spectacular journey southwards and the splendours of the Nanchao empire in great detail.

There is no need to disprove the legend at great length. As far as can be ascertained, it is extremely unlikely that the T'ai peoples were ever within a thousand miles of the Altai mountains. Moreover, it is now generally accepted amongst historians that the Nanchao kingdom was never dominated by the T'ai.

The idea that the T'ai came originally from northern Mongolia probably stems from a misreading of a statement by Terrien de Lacouperie. He stated that China received its language, arts, sciences and institutions from the "colonies of the Ugro-Altaic Bak families who came from Western Asia some twenty-three centuries B.C.". This statement was intended simply as a general background of the origins of the Chinese and the author does not indicate whether or not T'ai people were amongst these "colonies". It was, however, taken to mean just that and was written about in popular books such as Dodd's. The latter embroidered on this idea and states that the Chinese must be regarded as younger relatives of the T'ai. The Altai myth keeps cropping up in unscholarly works, but historians have never taken the Mongolian journey seriously.

b) Nanchao, southwest China

The identification of Nanchao with T'ai peoples has received much more attention amongst scholars. Again, it may have been Terrien de Lacouperie who began the story, and later researchers, taking his identification for granted, added more and more convincing details. Terrien de Lacouperie proposed that the Mung tribes, whom he recognised as T'ai, formed the leading clan in the Nanchao agglomeration. Ever since, the T'ai kingdom of Nanchao has found its way into history books. In the first lengthy history of Thailand written in the English language, Wood elaborates upon the great cultural similarities between Nanchao and the Sukhothai kingdom of the 13th century A.D. As late as 1951 Carthew gave a lecture on the T'ai of Nanchao, complete with details of dynasties and major events. Even a common textbook such as Hall's *A History of South-East Asia* contains a brief description of this T'ai kingdom. The first doubts on the T'ai-ness of Nanchao were formulated by Credner in 1935, and his statements have been followed by so many other critical studies that at present it is widely accepted that the Nanchao kingdom was never dominated by T'ai.

c) Central China

Whilst the Altai mountains and Nanchao legends may thus safely be disregarded in a scholarly work on the origin of T'ai peoples, there exist many theories pointing to an origin in Central China. These considerations about the early history of the T'ai usually rest upon attempts to bring order into the bewildering number of ethnic groups mentioned in Chinese annals. Often there is no more known than a name, a geographical location or a characteristic cultural trait. Some tribal names are used for groups in quite
distinct parts of the Chinese empire and this has caused scholars to trace migration routes.

In general, those who have attempted to trace T'ais into the first millennium B.C. or further in the past, have been obstructed in their work by the fact that T'ai peoples are not mentioned in any pre-Han text by a name readily recognised as T'ai. Consequently, researchers have had to identify tribes with different names as T'ai speakers. The facts that the various scholars mentioned in the following paragraphs have come up with a wide range of identifications and that there is no consensus about the possible route the T'ais could have taken from China to their present locations in mainland Southeast Asia should warn us that such exercises often lead to no more than hypothetical results.

Many researchers who have ventured opinions about the origin of the T'ais base themselves upon etymological equations when they trace this particular minority group. Terrien de Lacouperie, apart from identifying the Mung, Liao and Pa peoples with T'ais (for reasons which remain rather obscure), also thought that Shang traders who are reported to have overthrown the Hsia dynasty (second millennium B.C.), were the ancestors of the Shans, the T'ai speakers in northern Burma. He argues: "Many names, much like these, such as Tchang, Siang, Shen, Sien, etc., are met with in the nomenclature of native clans and tribes of the same stock in its earlier seats in Central China, and leave no doubt that they all represented one original name." A recent example of such etymological determinism is provided by Hsü, who follows the ancestors of T'ai speaking Chuangs to Ts'ang-wu kuo, four thousand years ago. Without additional corroborating evidence, such tracing of a word does not aid us in our search for a T'ai homeland, for by itself the exercise is inadequate for establishing an ethnic identity.

Much of the earliest research on linguistic interrelationships appears speculative, yet it is quoted in support of later theories. For example, the Chou dynasty in the first millennium B.C. was proclaimed to be T'ai speaking on the basis of a handful of Chou words. Note the following analysis. The scene is Hupeh in the year 663 B.C.: The people of Tsu called 'suckling' tau or nou, and 'a tiger' they called wu-tu, hence the child was called 'Tov-wu-tu', and he became subsequently Tze-wen, the chief minister of Tsu. The nearest approximation to these words are found in the Tai-Chan vocabularies, where 'suckle or sucking' is called dut (Siamese), and 'a tiger' is huo, wo, su, etc.

In the Haas transcription, 'suckling' is duud, and 'tiger' is sya, and it appears rather far-fetched to equate Tou-wu-tu with duudsya unless this is backed up with a detailed statement explaining the transformation stages. Yet, in the 1950's Wiens appears to accept this type of evidence when he mentions that Terrien de Lacouperie has recognised various words as T'ai. On the same type of evidence (eight words, five of which could be construed to show some similarity to Thai) the Pang people of prehistoric times in central China were proclaimed to belong to the T'ai peoples.

The scholar who has assigned the T'ais the most spectacular role in early China is von Eickstedt. Drawing bold historical lines, this researcher decided that all the peoples which were called Man, Yao, Lao, Pa or Liao belonged to the category of T'ai peoples, and that some three to four thousand years ago they occupied all the vast fertile areas of eastern China. According to von Eickstedt, throughout the second millennium B.C. the T'ais were masters of the plains of the Yangtze and Hwang Ho rivers. Around 700 B.C. a gigantic struggle for these plains arose and was finally won by the Chinese. The T'ais were forced to withdraw southwards to the regions they occupy at present.
stedt's view there is no doubt that ancient China should by right be called Thailand. The remarkable fact that the annals do not once mention T'ais by name in pre-Han times is explained simply by a strong pro-Chinese bias in all these written works. It almost amounts to a Confucian plot to prevent the T'ai peoples from obtaining their historical due. This view of early T'ai history appears to suit the chauvinistic lectures for Thai village scouts even better than the Altai mountain legend, but it has thus far received but little attention in Thailand.

Whilst it may be historically plausible to depict a prolonged and bitter struggle between southern valley dwellers and northern Chinese during the first millennium B.C., it is quite another matter to assign an ethnic and cultural identity to the peoples of the Yangtze basin. They may or may not have been T'ai speakers. Von Eickstedt appears to make this identification rather intuitively, or at least he refrains from presenting evidence to make it plausible to give all these "southern Barbarians" the label T'ai. Until there are exhaustive comparative linguistic research data and a proper archaeological backing, such simplistic identifications must be regarded as hypothetical.

Of the recent attempts to bring order into the many southern tribes of ancient China, Eberhard's is probably the most original, encompassing and ambitious. In a wide search through virtually all available written material on southern tribes, he has distinguished a wealth of themes. Eberhard has managed to connect and interlink snippets of information obtained from legends and depictions of "south Barbarians" on aspects such as tools, religious beliefs or folklore. Finally he has ordered series of these "chains" into distinctive types of culture. For South and East China, Eberhard reduces the bewildering count of information into five major types of cultures, each of these cultures representing an economic way of life. Thus there is a swidden agricultural type, a wet-rice culture, an intermediate type between swiddeners and permanently settled agriculturalists, there is a hunting culture and one which combines hunting with animal husbandry and a little agriculture.

In this context, it is not possible to do full justice to Eberhard's painstaking studies. They certainly bring new insight into the early history of the region. However, with regard to the origin of T'ai speakers, the results seem quite puzzling. The main reasons for this criticism are the facts that Eberhard has labelled each of his five types with an ethnic term and the wet-rice culture has been given the T'ai epithet. Whilst there may be little doubt that T'ai peoples practised wet-rice agriculture during the first millennium B.C. or even earlier, it is quite misleading to assign to all wet-rice growers the T'ai ethnicity unless this is made plausible by a wealth of corroborating evidence.

By giving the T'ai label to all material in Chinese annals on ricegrowing cultures, Eberhard seems to have lumped T'ai culture together with various other cultural complexes. To a student of T'ai ritual, the 200 pages of T'ai culture in Eberhard's major work on southern China read in most instances like an account of totally alien types of culture, and only occasionally appear to have any link with the present day T'ais. Eberhard is probably quite right to postulate a wet-rice culture in the Yangtze basin as early as the recent millennium B.C., "because otherwise various developments in the proto-Chinese cultures would not make sense". It is a different matter, however, to call it T'ai culture. Both von Eickstedt and Eberhard appear to have used the term T'ai in a rather arbitrary manner. As a result, though they both place the early T'ai culture in the Yangtze river delta, they end up by giving this label to quite different tribes. Whilst Eberhard feels that the Pai-man, and the Li are T'ai cultures, and the Shang and Lung-
han cultures were heavily influenced by T'ai\textsuperscript{27}, von Eickstedt lists the Man, Yao, Pan-hu-chung, Lao, Pa and even probably the Liao as T'ai\textsuperscript{28}. Most of von Eickstedt’s T'ai would fall under non-T’ai labels in Eberhard’s works.

There are many more scholars who have claimed to have identified the central Chinese homeland of the T’ai many thousands of years ago. Prince Damrong generously assigns them a region stretching from the Yangtze river through Szechuan and Yunnan to Laos, and states that this whole region was once inhabited by the T’ai\textsuperscript{29}. Ling Shun-sheng, basing himself upon tracing the legend of the divine farmer Shen-nung demonstrates that the T’ai and Han peoples stem from a common stock\textsuperscript{30}. Kachorn Sukhabanij goes back to the second millennium B.C., and makes the T’ai part of the Lung-shan culture. In his view the T’ai started migrating southwestwards in 1028 B.C. as a result of the Chou kingdom’s victory over the Shangs\textsuperscript{31}. Likhit Hoontrakul finds T’ai people north of the Yangtze river some 5000 years ago. Mainly by etymological reconstructions he describes a trek southward, quite different from those of previous scholars\textsuperscript{32}.

It may thus be concluded that there is no agreement amongst scholars on what exactly was the central Chinese homeland of the T’ai peoples. Those who interpreted remarks in Chinese annals have made various possible identifications, but none of these was so clear and obvious that it was acceptable to other scholars.

In modern compilations of all the available knowledge of ancient China’s past, it is possible to reconstruct much of the culture of the peoples who lived in the Yangtze valley. The Lung-shan culture of two millennia B.C. can be described in some detail with the help of annals and especially with archaeological evidence. It is known what type of animals were kept, what plants cultivated, how the houses were constructed and what burial ceremonies were prevalent. This evidence appears quite unrelated to the T’ai cultures. As far as can be reconstructed, T’ai peoples appear to have had different burial practices, have built their houses in a different way, many of their cultivated plants were not grown in the Yangtze valley, and they did not have so many domesticated animals as the peoples of the Lung-shan culture. Even more strikingly different from the T’ai appear the Shang and Chou kingdoms with their advanced stone carving, their use of the chariot, their cities, chamber burials and their system of writing. In contrast, the T’ai peoples appear to have had a rather small scale myang (independent town and its immediate surroundings) society with little differentiation in professions. Encapsulated in their valleys, they had not developed urbanism or road transport like the Chinese\textsuperscript{33}.

d) South China

One of the main advocates for a “southern China” origin is Li Chi, who, in contrast to von Eickstedt and Eberhard, assigns but a minor role to the T’ai speakers\textsuperscript{34}. Basing himself largely upon anthropological evidence, he does not identify any major political groupings of the Yangtze valley with T’ai. When, almost as an afterthought the role of the T’ai is discussed, he places them during the Han dynasty all over southern China, except Yunnan and Kweichow\textsuperscript{35}, the two provinces where T’ai can be found at present.

When we consider the assumptions underlining Li Chi’s statement it appears that he determined the spread of T’ai speakers solely upon the distribution of tattooing. Present day T’ai peoples are often tattooed, and he has used this ethnographic trait as a means of identifying the ancient T’ai. There are several reasons to suspect this method of tracing the origin of T’ai. In the first place, it is by no means certain that T’ai were the only tattooing people of southern China during the first millennium B.C. Indeed, it has as yet not
even been established that T'ais used to tattoo themselves in prehistoric times. It is theoretically possible that they learnt the use of the tattooing needle much more recently. Moreover such tattooing evidence should be carefully weighed. When searching through the literature for mention of tattooed people, a distinction should be made between various types of tattooing and the different parts of the body mentioned. For example, if a tribe is reported to have facial tattoos for men, it cannot simply be lumped together with a tribe whose women have their legs permanently decorated. In both instances, it would not be prudent to take that sort of tattooing as "typically" T'ai, for it is uncommon amongst present day T'ai speakers to have the face decorated with tattoos and women are normally excluded from tattooing altogether.

Another scholar who has given serious thought to the question of the origin of the T'ais and traces them to southern China is Seidenfaden. He depicts the earliest history as one whereby peoples of the "Thai-Kadai-Indonesian alignment (came) from a region somewhere in Yunnan". In Seidenfaden's opinion, T'ais did not arrive in Tonkin until the 8th-9th centuries A.D. Seidenfaden appears to have based his "Thai-Kadai-Indonesian alignment" upon a measure of seriological and linguistic research, but I have been unable to ascertain how he determined Yunnan to be the ancient homeland. Roux appears willing to place the original T'ais in Szechuan, but refrains from giving his reasons.

c) The coastal regions of southern China and northern Vietnam

There are proponents of a theory that the "homeland" of the T'ais must be sought in the warm coastal regions of southern China and the Red River delta. The first scholar to do so was Credner, who based himself upon the type of habitat present-day T'ais prefer, the fact that theirs is a rice-growing culture and the fact that they can be found in the warm lowlands, never on mountainous slopes. Izikowitz also has come to the conclusion that the T'ais came from the river valleys. He specifically names the Red River delta, where the T'ais must have been prior to the coming of the Vietnamese.

Mote, discarding the evidence which had led scholars to assume a central or western Chinese origin also prefers a southern coastal location for the T'ais. Recently Chamberlain, summarizing linguistic evidence and drawing to some extent upon local T'ai legends, favoured a location in Tonkin as the place from where the many branches of the T'ai language stem.

f) Thailand

The first person to suggest that the T'ais were in prehistoric times inhabitants of the region now known as Thailand was Wales. This view was derived from a study of ancient skeletons. Later Wales corrected himself and concluded that there was no reason to maintain this theory. Sood Sangvichien, however, revived the idea in 1966 by pointing out that there were certain similarities between ancient skeletons and the present population of Thailand. This hypothesis was put forward with some caution and it has received relatively little attention.

During the 1970s, however, spectacular finds in northeast Thailand brought prehistory in the publicity. The painted pottery which is now known as Ban Chiang was assigned an extremely early date, and ancient bronze and iron objects have caused a general reassessment of the prehistory of mainland Southeast Asia. Ban Chiang pots have found their way to almost all Thai provincial musea and they have featured on several national stamp issues. When Sangvichien determined that Ban Chiang skeletons have certain similarities with modern Thai skeletons, his views received more publicity."
Thai race lived in present-day Thailand more than 4000 years ago is proudly quoted in a recent article by Tu Yu-tin and Chen Lu-fan. It does not lie within my competence to check the evidence, but I have it on good authority that the similarities noted by Sangvichien are not of the order to determine a genetic relationship. In addition the modern Thai skeletons in his sample probably contain non-Thai or part-Thai material. We must await the results of many excavations presently under way before a clear picture of the type(s) of people inhabiting the region at such early periods will emerge.

The overview of some of the theories regarding the origin of the T’ais whilst by no means exhaustive, should suffice to demonstrate that there is at present no agreement amongst scholars as to the whereabouts of the T’ais during prehistoric times. Even if we go back in time a mere thousand years, there is no clear picture of the wanderings of the T’ais. Considering the origin of the T’ais is apparently a difficult and intricate task. Since the T’ais do not seem to have a very ancient writing tradition such a task must of necessity be multidisciplinary. A perusal of a neighbouring country’s annals is insufficient by itself. We must take into account, not only historical data, but draw upon the latest archaeological research, linguistic studies, blood group analysis and the findings of anthropologists. In this essay an attempt is made to present at least the beginning of such a stock-taking.

II. Constructing the Past out of the Present

A. Genetic distance between various populations

Early studies into the racial type of T’ais were hampered by two major problems. In the first place, when dealing with Southeast Asians, researchers found it difficult to place racial labels upon people because it was unclear which types formed "pure" races. Whilst it was easy to make a sharp distinction between a negrito hunter and a lowland farmer, it was very difficult to decide what was the difference between say, a Cambodian and a Burmese, or a Laotian and a Vietnamese. The second problem was that the T’ai speakers appear to have quite freely mixed with local people during their spread over mainland Southeast Asia. So thoroughly are T’ais and Mons intermingled that in present day Thailand only the specialist may recognise the different stocks. Similarly the Chuangs of Kwangsi province demonstrate distinct Chinese traits.

Thus, statements on the T’ai race tend to be rather vague. Credner classifies them as Mongoloid, that is, having sleek black hair, dark brown iris, pronounced cheekbones and a relatively flat nose. Such a broad statement is too encompassing for our purpose in that it categorises the T’ais with the Chinese and the Malays and does not guide us with regard to the possible origin of the T’ai peoples.

An obvious physical aspect to look for is the epicanthic fold, so prominent amongst Chinese and quite rare amongst the Malays. This trait is virtually absent amongst all Austroasiatic peoples. Whether or not the epicanthic fold is common or not can be taken as an indication of whether a racial group has sprouted from the central Chinese region. A race having the epicanthic fold can be classified as modern, or recent mongoloid. A race lacking it falls in the palaeo-mongoloids class. The T’ais, according to Credner, have a relatively rare occurrence of the epicanthic fold and fall somewhere between palaeo and modern mongoloid.
The study of facial characteristics has become quite unfashionable. Yet in such research there may be scope for interesting future studies. Anthropologists should, for example, take special note of opinions of local informants on what constitutes a "typical" regional face. There are occasions that a Bangkok Thai may point out a person who in his opinion, must have come from the Chiang Mai area, or a face which looks to him Laotian. Such faces could be photographed and from the basis of deeper enquiries into what the original T'ai stock might have looked like. In this context it is interesting to note that the people of Thailand often believe that the Laotians represent almost pure T'ai stock.

It is much more fashionable to try to determine genetic relationships between different populations by looking at blood groups, enzymes and serum proteins. Lie-Injo, whilst trying to establish whether Australian Aborigines are genetically linked with peoples of Southeast Asia, compared research on Negritos, Senoi, Aboriginal Malays, Chinese, Indians, Batak and T'ais. In his conclusions he established that the T'ais were closely linked with both the Malays and the Chinese. Just like Credner's results, such a broad statement does not bring us any further towards determining the genetic position of the T'ais. Moreover, it should be realised that in his research Lie-Injo depended upon people from Thailand to provide the T'ai sample. It should be clear from the foregoing that the inhabitants of Thailand form only one branch of the T'ai and that they appear to have mixed with the autochthonous Mons.

Simmons casts his net further and compares blood group patterns for a wider range of ethnic groups. One of his conclusions is relevant for the possible origin of the T'ais. Amongst his five rough classifications of peoples, Simmons places T'ais together with peoples of New Guinea, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaya and Borneo. For our purposes it is relevant to note that T'ais are fitted genetically with Austronesians. Recent linguistic research points in a similar direction, as will be discussed later in this paper. Simmons' conclusion is that T'ais are fitted genetically with Austronesians. Recent linguistic research points in a similar direction, as will be discussed later in this paper.

Both researchers seem to have been unaware of the fact that in 1957 Somsak Phansomboon reported on the results of a bioerological examination of 421 Thais. He compared the Thais ABO, MNS, RL, Lewis, Kell and Duffy blood groups with representative samples taken from Cantonese and Indonesian groups. He concluded that the Thais were quite dissimilar to the Chinese and closely resembled the Indonesians, especially the Javanese. In Phansomboon's opinion, the origin of the T'ais must be sought in the south rather than the north.

Additionally, there has been a blood group analysis conducted in the Tongkin area, in which T'ais and Vietnamese were tested in order to find out their genetic distance to other populations. Seidenfaden quotes the work of Maneffe and Bezocier who have shown that both T'ais and Vietnamese of the Tongkin region were nearer to Indonesian than to the Chinese stock.

There seems much scope for further research in this field. In the first place it would be fascinating to obtain blood samples from all T'ai groups, ranging from the Khamti to the Chuang, in order to determine how homogeneous the T'ais are from a genetic point of view. Bioerological research could also provide more satisfying results with regard to the genetic distances between various groups if it included the range of the so-called Kadai speakers. It would be extremely helpful if such data could be obtained for a range
of surrounding peoples, including a gamut of tribal populations in southern China, the most important Vietnamese groups, especially the Muong-speakers, and various groups in the Philippines.

B. Linguistic research

Long before the T'ai languages were properly recorded and studied, they were classified as a branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family. This categorization was probably based upon the fact that the T'ai used a monosyllabic, tonal speech and that they shared some vocabulary with Chinese. It was not until 1942, when Benedict published his seminal article in which he links T'ai, Kadai and Indonesian, that the possibility of T'ai as an Austronesian language was seriously considered. Benedict has since greatly expanded and modified his original stance, but he has seen no reason to change his opinion that T'ai belongs essentially to the Austronesian languages. Whilst there is still a fierce debate amongst linguists about the validity of some of Benedict's data, by now it has been conceded widely that there is a core of acceptable arguments which links T'ai at some early stage with Austronesian.

At the same time, Benedict argues that some sort of very early contact between proto-T'ai and Chinese is likely. According to Benedict, from linguistic evidence alone it is unclear whether archaic Chinese at 1200 B.C. or earlier moved northwards, skirting the centre of concentration of Austro-Thai populations or whether the T'ais once moved up to the northwestern corner of China. At this stage of research into T'ai languages, such early migration routes appear rather speculative, especially when there exist other languages, such as Muong and Vietnamese which share Austroasiatic characteristics and which could have influenced archaic Chinese. There is at least some historical evidence for a penetration of Viet culture in the Chinese Chou dynasty, but none has been demonstrated for T'ai peoples.

One of the most striking pieces of evidence linguists have discovered is that the various T'ai languages are almost mutually intelligible and that therefore the spread over such a large area of Southeast Asia must have been fairly recent. If they had not recently come from a common centre, they would have been more diversified than they are. The age of proto-T'ai, the common stock from which all T'ai languages developed, has been estimated by Gedney to be not more than 2000 years.

Recently, Chamberlain has compared forty-six T'ai dialects and drawn a possible reconstruction of the various stages from proto-T'ai (dated a hypothetical 250 B.C.) to the modern range of T'ai languages. He has also noted that the T'ais appear to have moved generally in a westerly direction throughout their branching off into new dialects. All the evidence he has accumulated is consistent with a proto-T'ai homeland in the Tonkin region.

In this respect, it is relevant to examine the present distribution of a series of languages related to T'ai, but apparently split off a long time before T'ai speakers began to spread over mainland Southeast Asia. These are the Kam-Sui languages, as well as the Lakkia and Kelao languages in Kweichow and Kwangsi, the Laqua-Laha and Lati languages of northern Vietnam and the Ong-be and Li languages on the island of Hainan (see the horizontally shaded areas on the map). All these so-called Kadai languages can be found around the region which may have contained the T'ai homeland before the various T'ai languages became separated. Disregarding the spillage of T'ai languages...
into Laos, Burma and Thailand, which occurred within historical times, the related Kadai languages appear to almost completely encircle a territory containing much of Tongkin and a vast region of Kwangsi.

This geographical distribution of Kadai languages seems consistent with a view that the early Kadai languages were originally found all around the gulf of Tongkin area and that T'ai speakers either developed there or arrived in the heart of this region and pushed the former into the relatively remote sections of the region. As we will see later, this view is quite consistent with findings from other disciplines.

C. Historical evidence

During the thirteenth century A.D. the T'ais appear already to have attained a foothold in all the regions where they are found today. It is the century of the greatest might of Sukhothai, and the T'ais had begun spreading on a large scale into the Chao Phraya basin, possibly as a result of a temporary weakening of the two major powers of mainland Southeast Asia, Burma and Cambodia. Looking at the foundation dates of T'ai principalities, it seems quite clear that T'ais had been expanding vigorously throughout the thirteenth century, for they had established themselves in Assam in 1228 and in Sukhothai in 1220. Nan was probably founded in the middle of the thirteenth century.

Going back in time a little, it is quite possible that this expansion had already begun in the twelfth century, for it would have taken some time for the T'ais to have reached Assam in 1228. In addition there is a reference to a Lü Kingdom of Alopi, founded in 1180. There is still ample scope for historians to study T'ai history further back in time. There exist many indigenous written sources dealing with ancient migration routes as well as genealogies claiming, at least in one instance, to go back as far as the seventh century A.D. It is a difficult, but challenging task, to compare such records with as yet largely unpublished old documents of groups such as the Lü and the Black Tai. The one published account of ancient legends of the latter group indicates that such comparison might yield interesting results.

It is commonly thought that the T'ais established themselves gradually by "infiltration", a slow process of filling up a region with T'ais, rather than by conquest. Broman has considered many of the theories on the basic character of the T'ai incursions and has come to the conclusion that these were probably much more forceful. A T'ai ruler, accompanied by a band of warriors and their families, would establish himself in a fertile valley and request local populations to recognise him and his followers as overlords or else give battle. Whilst there is but scanty evidence for any theory on this matter, the little there is seems to support Broman's point of view. A careful reading of the available T'ai historical legends indicates a journey of conquest rather than a peaceful spreading. Moreover, when the T'ais established themselves in regions which had a long written tradition such as the Mon kingdom of Haripunjaya, the changes are quite abrupt. Suddenly there appear no more Mon inscriptions; there are no signs of an initial compromise between Mon rulers and T'ais.

The T'ai conquest to the west and southwest has still be described. Apart from the largely neglected T'ai legends there are occasional references to peoples who probably were of T'ai origin in various inscriptions of Pagan in the twelfth century and in Cham
inscriptions of the 11th century. It may be safely assumed, however, that they did not play an important role in the regions now known as Burma and Thailand before the 11th century.

The only other written evidence which we have been able to trace and which may have bearing upon the whereabouts of T'ais in the earlier period deals with the regions of northern Vietnam and just above north Vietnam's border with China, thus supporting the idea that this area contained the homeland of the early T'ais. This material concerns the period of the Han dynasty, when, if we follow Gedney, T'ai speakers had not yet broken up in distinct language groups. One significant reference is a remark in the Imperial Annals of Annam, which records the rebellion of the Trung sisters. The Chinese troops which were sent to put down this disturbance are reported to have met with a tribe of people called "Tây dỗ". These have been identified with the Red T'ai, who are still known by that name. The place where these T'ai speakers were found was, according to the commentary to the annals, in what is now known as the province to Thanh Hoa, a delta at the southern end of Tongkin.

There is one early account regarding the Ai-lao, who are mentioned for the first time in Han times in the Hou-han-shu, according to Eberhard. They were reported then to have lived in the Kwangsi-Yunnan area, the region of China bordering on Tongkin. At this stage we cannot be certain that these actually were T'ais.

This but scanty and not very satisfactory evidence, but little as it is, is consistent with evidence from other disciplines, and supports the view that T'ai speakers were found during Han times in the Tongkin area.

In general there is thus but little information on T'ai speakers between the first and the eleventh century A.D. This paucity of material is probably related to two characteristics of the T'ais of that period. In the first place it seems that T'ai speakers did not at that time organise themselves into the form of a centralised kingdom. They seem always to have inhabited the fertile alluvial deposits in various river valleys. In the higher parts of Tongkin such places are scattered thinly over the region. Their habitat thus did not encourage large-scale co-operation and throughout the early times T'ai peoples appear to have had no larger political unit than the myang, the fortified town with a series of attached dependent villages. Such a dispersed set of politically independent units is not likely to have acquired a firm identity in the written histories of surrounding populations.

Secondly, if the homeland of the T'ais between the first and the twelfth century was in the belt of upper valleys around the Red River Delta, it was not in a hotly contested tract. This region contained neither major trade routes nor centres of important resources during the first millennium of our era. Thus T'ai speakers occupied no strategic position and lived in a relatively quiet backwater of Southeast Asia. T'ais still occupy most of this possible homeland. When the French conquered Indochina they encountered fiercely independent T'ai speaking tribes in all the higher river valleys, and an especially strong agglomerate of myangs in the Sip Song Chau Thai region, a Tongkin region bordering on upper Laos which is the legendary place of origin of many western groups of T'ai speakers.

If the T'ais lived all that time in the Tongkinese valleys, events around them did not totally leave them untouched. There is some indication that they moved northward into China in the eighth century and established two myangs in the Si Kiang basin. In the beginning of the ninth century, after having been driven back by the Chinese, T'ais tried
again in vain to dominate that region73. In addition they almost certainly were involved in the Yunnanese invasion of the Tongkin Delta in 846 and 860. The Nanchao forces appear to have been aided by local tribes of upper Tongkin, and from the fact that one of the commentaries on the Annamese annals confuses the Nanchao people with the Alao74, we may infer that T’ai speakers were involved in these wars.

The picture of the expansion of T’ai speakers is by no means clear, but it is possible that their first conquests were directed towards Kwangsi and also possibly southern Yunnan. The incursions into Laos, Burma and northern Thailand seem to have taken place at a later stage, during the twelfth and thirteenth century, possibly because the terrain in northern Laos was not inviting and formed a physical barrier which made T’ai speakers look towards the northern regions first. The access from Tongkin to Kwangsi valleys was much easier and appears to have invited T’ai conquest earlier.

D. Anthropological evidence

Just as linguists are able to survey various T’ai languages and determine whether a certain set of related words are indigenous or must be seen as borrowings from outside, so the anthropologist can handle information on cultural items. The first to do so and come to a conclusion with regard to the original homeland of the T’ai was Credner. As mentioned above, he based himself upon the fact that all T’ai peoples are rice-growers and live in tropical and subtropical valleys, and determined that the original homeland should not be sought in western to upper China, but rather in the direction of subtropical southern China75. The Tongkin valleys were not considered by Credner as a possible place of origin, but this inclusion does not clash with his argumentation.

Summary descriptions of the cultural elements common to the T’ai appeared in an ethnographic gazetteer76, and its successor Ethnic Groups of Mainland Southeast Asia77. Major traits listed are the common myang polity, the economy based on rice growing, the fact that T’ai tend to build their houses on stilts and the widespread belief in phi. The authors do not seem to be fully aware of the fact that such information can be vastly extended and used as an independent means of obtaining knowledge of the proto-T’ai culture. Instead they unquestioningly accept a Yangtze and Szechuan origin for the T’ai78.

The first scholar to use a comparative analysis of ethnographic material in order to establish a probable historical basis is Broman79. By concentrating upon the Tongkin T’ai, he managed to describe the outline of the T’ai political system of the past. This was characterized by myang organization, a division between aristocracy and commoners, the practice of polygamy, and an organization geared for warfare. Broman also touches upon religious beliefs, and mentions the typical T’ai “animism“, the belief in the spirit of the soil, and the religious practices with regard to the town pillar80. The earliest T’ai inscriptions of the late thirteenth and fourteenth century can be used as strong corroborating evidence for the reconstruction of inter-myang relations and system of marriage alliances.

There is still much evidence to be sorted out from the various T’ai chronicles. From a reading of the Ahom Buranji, for example, it would appear that this most western group of T’ai had horses and elephants, that they carried cooking pots when setting out for a new conquest, that they had a 60 year cycle and that amongst their many gods Lengdon, the god of thunder, ranked supreme. In addition there are mentions of animal sacrifices,
the *khwan* ceremony, the ritual use of drums and the ritual consumption of human flesh. An inventory of cultural traits in all available annals would be helpful in reconstructing proto-T'ai culture, but as yet this exercise has not been attempted.

**III. Comparing T'ai Rituals**

Anthropologists can, however, provide evidence for many aspects of proto-T'ai culture from yet another angle: the comparative study of rituals. It is especially in ceremonies that archaic elements tend to be preserved. People often perform a ritual act simply because it has been handed down from times immemorial. Even though the meaning which is attached to a ceremonial act may vary between, say a Buddhist T'ai and one who has never adopted Buddhism, the ceremonial act itself may be identical. As I remarked elsewhere: "ceremonies tend to preserve an interrelated network of norms of a period prior to the time of enactment". 81

To illustrate the technique, a detail of T'ai funeral rites can be taken, namely the selection of a place where the corpse may be deposited. Bourlet describes the custom for the Thay who live just south of Sip Song Chau Thai 82. The person who tries to find out where the corpse may rest goes to the part of the forest reserved for such purposes, takes an egg and throws it in the air whilst he says: "If this is the proper place, break!" If the place is right the egg will break. In the event the egg remains unbroken a new spot will have to be found. Archaimbault, relating the death rites in Bassac, in the southern part of Laos gives us an account of a very similar custom which he calls *sieng k'ai* (Thai: *sian khâi*) — prognostication with the aid of an egg. This time it is done to establish where the funeral pyre is to be made. The introduction of cremation is a Buddhist influence and may be considered an innovation upon the proto-T'ai funeral custom. Archaimbault reports: "If the egg, when falling, does not break, the spot is already taken by a spirit and one has to make another throw. The place where the egg scatters will be marked with a basket containing a ball of glutinous rice, as an indication that this spot is conceded by Mother Earth and is from now on the property of the deceased". 83 Similar use of an egg was reported for the Xieng Khouang and for the region of Luang Prabang 84. The same custom is described by Phya Anuman Rajadhon for Northeast Thailand 85. Amongst the Lao Song Dam, who were separated from their homeland and transferred to Ratchaburi province more than 150 years ago, the burial site is selected by throwing two bamboo sticks in the air. If they both fall with the same side turned upwards, a new site has to be chosen 86.

It appears therefore quite possible that proto-T'ai funeral customs contained originally a ritual of finding out whether some spirit would be offended by receiving the corpse on a specific piece of land. The custom has been described for a range of T'ai speakers in Laos and northeastern Thailand as well as amongst peoples of Lao origin in Central Thailand. However, whilst it is possible that the ritual should be included in a proto-T'ai reconstruction it cannot as yet be accepted with a reasonable measure of certainty. In the first place the custom must be checked as a possible loan from some neighbouring non-T'ai group. Secondly, the reports do not as yet cover a sufficiently wide range of T'ai speakers; they are all described for Lao peoples. When reading on T'ai funeral practices in Tongkin 87, amongst the T'ai Yuan of northern Thailand 88 and those of central Thailand 89, no further mention of the custom was encountered. Before making a decision on the position of this custom, the burial customs of the Ahom, the Lü, the Shans and the Chuang should also be scanned.
From the example and its treatment it should be clear that comparison of ritual is a painstaking scientific exercise. It involves judging primary sources for their accuracy and scope, eliminating ritual details which were borrowed from other peoples, ensuring that ritual similarities occur amongst members of the T'ais speakers which have been separated since the early days of T'ai expansion.

Using the method with great caution, it is possible, however, to reconstruct a multitude of ritual details. With regard to funeral practices, for example, it is likely that the proto-T'ais placed wax over the face of their dead, that they sacrificed animals and gave the deceased some possessions to take into afterlife. It appears likely that the officiant used a metal weapon to influence spirits of the dead and that no corpse was allowed to be carried out of a house via the regular ladder. The move to the cemetery appears amongst a wide spectrum of T'ais to be in the form of a procession, and through a comparison of cemeteries it is possible to reconstruct even the proto-T'ai burial house.

Such a scholarly comparison of ritual details could provide us with a wealth of information about other customs such as marriage and birth ritual, agrarian rituals, methods of housebuilding and ways of addressing religious agents. It should take into account the seemingly unimportant details, like the ceremonial use of puffed rice, sesame seed, ripe bananas and sugarcane. The work can be expanded to cover ceremonial dress, hairstyles and patterns of decoration. This will be an invaluable tool in the determination of the origin of the T'ais. Recently I have attempted to analyse some of these rituals in order to determine the likely proto-T'ai elements.

IV. Proto-T'ais During the First Millennium B.C.: Some Speculations

All available evidence supports the idea that the T'ais formed a fairly compact group which did not start to spread widely until, at the earliest, the beginning of our era. It appears on present information likely that their homeland was in the fertile valleys of the Tongkin region and possibly in a small part of present day Kwangsi. At the beginning of our era, the lower Red River delta was possibly already occupied by the Viets, who effectively locked the T'ais into their valley habitat. There is at present no way of telling how the T'ais arrived in Tongkin. It is not known if they came along a coastal route, if they arrived by sea or came from an inland area. Possibly a future reconstruction of proto-T'ai culture and language will give us clues towards solving that problem.

From the distribution of various Kadai languages, which are closely related but which were separated a considerable time ago, we may infer that T'ais were at the beginning of our era not recent immigrants, and that they have occupied an area in the Tongkinese vicinity for a considerable time. Benedict's opinion that the languages next removed from Tai-Kadai are the Miao-Yao languages, which are found in a halfcircle even further removed from the Tongkin Delta, also supports the theory that T'ai languages have been in the region for a long time.

However, there is no evidence that can withstand scrutiny of a T'ai presence during the first millennium B.C. either in Annam, or in southern China. The cultures reconstructed by archaeologists and palaeographers appear to have no similarity with what we may expect the T'ai culture to have been. Lacking any data suggesting otherwise, we may for the time being surmise that T'ais could be found in the Tongkin-Kwangsi area throughout the first millennium B.C.

Archaeologists have established that in this area there existed a culture, known as Dong-son, named after the site of Dong-So'n in Thanh-Hoa province. Much is known
about the Dong-Son culture from artifacts found here and in related sites. In view of the possible proximity of T'ais a relationship to what is known of the Dong-son culture is worth investigating.

Coedes has summarized the major finds about the Dong-son culture, which had its centre in northern Vietnam during the first millennium B.C. It had 'basket' pottery reminiscent of the neolithic pottery found in Vietnam. Very little use was made of iron. The most striking feature of what we know of the culture is the bronze drum shaped like an upturned cooking pot. These drums are lavishly decorated and often show various scenes which tell us about aspects of the Dong-son culture. Various scholars have studied the drums and made suggestions about relationships with surrounding cultures. The idea that nomadic people from the west were responsible for the Dong-son culture (the so-called "pontic theory") has found little merit in the eyes of later researchers. The scenes with human figures have reminded some of Dyak funerary ritual, and the patterns of decoration have reminded others of Oceanic art.

Coedes is inclined to consider the Dongsonians to have been Southeast Asians and to regard them as ancestors of various Indonesian minority peoples. He bases himself on the fact that Dongsonians appear to have created irrigation systems consisting of an upper water tank, a service tank and artificial lake as well as conduits leading to the paddy fields. Pearson, summing up the main characteristics of the Dong-son culture, depicts it as primarily a ceremonial and trading culture, containing a stratified society, whereby a group of wealthy people were able to control great wealth in the form of cowrie, bronze weapons and vessels.

The excavations at Shih-chai-shan in south Yunnan have uncovered a closely related bronze culture which is generally linked with the Tien culture because of the finding of a Chinese seal, bearing the name of the kingdom of Tien as well as the fact that this immensely rich collection was found on the shore of Lake Tien. From the many finds it is possible to tell what type of clothing Tien people wore, there are scenes with men, women and children; pictures of farmers, warriors, dancing girls and musicians. We can see the common hairstyles, look at boats, a ceremonial house and a rice-storage hut. In addition it is possible to analyse decorative patterns and the art styles.

It would be possible to draw up a case for the argument that T'ai peoples were the ones responsible for both the Tien and Dong-son cultures. The roof of a T'ai house on the border between Laos and Tongkin is exactly like the one of the kan-lan style building on the lid of a drumshaped container. T'ais have practiced irrigation techniques in their valleys since times immemorial, their houses are built on stilts like the ones found in Dong-so'n. T'ais knew many centuries ago of the art of sewing clothes just like Tien and Dong-son peoples. The use of bronze drums is a feature of T'ai culture, and from the earliest times T'ais have had kauri shells in their money system, and a clearly stratified society.

However, at this stage such a case remains purely speculative and it is not suggested here that Dong-son or Tien cultures be given the ethnic label of T'ai. It should be clear from the early part of this essay that this label has been granted with much too great an alacrity to various groups. In order to determine whether the T'ais were the Dongsonians or the ruling stratum of the Tien kingdom, we must first produce a clear study of proto-T'ai culture, which includes not only linguistic data such as Benedict has been collecting, but also the description of many core rituals acquired in the scientific manner described above. In addition there should be a comparative study of art forms amongst
the whole range of T'ai speakers, including tattooing designs, music and musical instruments, motifs on ceremonial clothing and a comparison of ancient T'ai pottery. Each of the findings should be weighed against the archaeological evidence.

The conclusion of such research could be that the similarities noted above were coincidental or the result of borrowing. If, however, the identification turns out satisfactorily, it would push the story of the homeland of the T'ais back to the beginning of the first millennium B. C. Furthermore, it could give rise to a new generation of romantic nationalist legends surrounding the ever-elusive "first T'ai". It may draw attention away from the cold and inhospitable Altai mountains and elicit new stories about the warm lowlands of Southeast Asia, the original home of the T'ai peoples.

Notes

1 The word T'ai in this essay refers to a group of related peoples in mainland Southeast Asia, which range from the Ahom in the northwest to the Chuang in the northeast and the Shans in the north to the Thais in the south. The apostrophe indicates aspiration which the commonly used term Tai leaves out. At the same time it avoids the spelling Thai, which is generally identified only with matters regarding Thailand.

2 The spelling of Thai words follows the Haas system, slightly modified to suit ordinary typewriters. Exceptions are made with words commonly known under a different spelling, such as some personal and geographical names.


6 See, for example Prawad Châdathaj by Phrá'Bqrthaethepatanaëi, Bangkok: Sinlapâ Ban-naakhaan, 1975, 2 Vols.


9 "The Cradle of the Shan Race", p. 11.


22 Wiens mentions 627 tribes, not including 122 folk groups only known by clan names, Han Chinese Expansion, pp. 36-37.
24 Ibid., pp. 146-348.
25 It appears that archaeologists are well under way to establishing a much earlier date to rice growing in eastern China, the end of the 4th millennium B.C. appears likely. See N. Barnard, "Radiocarbon Dates from China, Batch No. 4 and some Others", mimeographed, p. 41.
26 Eberhard, op. cit., p. 346.
27 Ibid., pp. 340-341.
35 Ibid., p. 258.
37 Ibid.
41 Mote, "Problems of Thai Prehistory".
45 Sood Sangvichien, "Khon Ban Chiang naj padcuban" Adid ruambodkhwaam kon prawad-thaad, Bangkok, Fine Arts University, 1974, as quoted by Tu Yu-tin and Chen Lu-fan in "Did the Conquest of Ta-kiu by Qubilai Cause a Mass of the Thai Race to Migrate Southwards?" which first appeared in Li-shih yen-chiu, and was translated into English and distributed by the Royal Thai Embassy in Peking, May 1978.
46 Note, however, amongst photographs of Chuang people some types which remind strongly of persons of Southeast Asian stock, see Kwangsi Chuang Autonomous Region (Peking: The Nationalities Publishing House), 1958, p. 104.
47 W. Credner, Siam Das Land der Tai, p. 139.
48 Ibid., pp. 139-140.
86 L. R. Pedersen, "Religious Activities during Dry Season among the Lao Song Dam, Thailand", Folk, Dansk Etnografisf Tidskrift, Vol. 16-17, 1974-1975, p. 356.
89 Sathian Kosèed, op. cit., pp. 345-644.
90 At the moment of submitting this article for publication, I had completed two papers related to the detailed comparison of T'ai rituals, one entitled: "Tai Funeral Customs: Towards a Reconstruction of Proto-Tai Ceremonies", the other: " Summoning the Khwan; An Ancient Tai Ceremony".
95 G. Coedes, op. cit., p. 19.
98 Compare the photographs provided by A. Bourlet, "Les Tbay", Anthropos, Vol. 2, 1907, p. 359 and 365 with the kan-lan in Bunker's "The Tien Culture", p. 293 and 300.