

Ancient links between Thai and Vietnam: Evidence from cognates, Sukhothai inscriptions, and traditional calendrical terms for animals.

Wilaiwan Khanittanan

Thammasat University

1. Introduction

(I am very grateful to Dr. Anthony Diller for his valuable comments and suggestions. All the mistakes are my own.)

In this paper, the terms 'Thai' and 'Tai' follow the usage common among historical linguists. 'Thai' refers to language varieties used in Thailand since the Sukhothai kingdom. 'Tai' refers to the group of languages or language family which includes 'Thai'. 'Tai' is also used in a more specific sense, referring to people in countries other than Thailand who are said speak Tai or follow Tai cultural practices, etc.)

The former homeland of people speaking Tai languages before they came to where they are at present has been the subject of research for scholars in various fields for over a century. The answers or explanations are various. This paper follows the theories of the great Thai linguistics scholar William J. Gedney. His proposals have been confirmed by many others in subsequent research. Gedney's work shows that Tais were originally living in Southwestern China and along the Red River basin in North Vietnam. Following one time frame suggested for the development of the Tai family (Diller 1990), ancient links between Tai speakers and Vietnam discussed in this paper must have started by the Proto- Southwestern Tai period which is around 1,000 – 1,300 years ago. However, this paper also refers to a historical evidence in an early Sukhothai inscription which is about 700 hundred years ago.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate five points of language evidence which indicate strong links between ancient Thai, especially Sukhothai Thai, and ancient Vietnamese. They are:

1. The link shown by the word “Muong” in Tai languages, in Thai, in Muong, and in Vietnamese.
2. The link shown by the last name “ Luong” /lʰaŋ / .This name is shared by Black Tai and the Muong of Vietnam. It also appears in an early Sukhothai inscription, recording an oath of allegiance.
3. The link shown by the Sukhothai kings' names. The names /lɔːthay, líːthay, lí-le-thay?, lʰ:-thay, sǎy-lʰ:-thay/ are unlike all other Thai kings'

names. They sound foreign despite the fact that the names have the word “Thai” as part of the name. Furthermore; they are more like those of ancient Vietnamese kings and leaders.

4. The link shown by the use of 12 calendrical terms for animals. Those terms are not original Tai vocabulary. The words are used only for astrological purposes. Thai speakers have their own words for those animals. Again, in Vietnam, these terms are used to refer to animals in everyday language. The terms are as follows: *chûat* “mouse”, *cha-lǔ*: “ox”, *kha:n* “tiger”, *thò* “rabbit”, *ma-ro:ŋ* “dragon, big snake”, *ma-sěj* “snake”, *ma-mia* “horse”, *ma-mɛ:* “goat”, *wô:k* “monkey”, *ra-ka:* “cock”, *cɔ:* “dog”, and *kun* “pig”. These terms are not native Tai words.

5. The link shown by a large number of cognates between Thai and Vietnamese despite their belonging to different language families. The cognates indicate extensive contact between the two.

2. *Muong*

“*Muong*”, /*muang*/“city”, is a very important word in Thai and Tai languages. It refers to the largest basic administrative unit among the Tai/Thai speakers. As for Thais, /*muang-thay*/ is Thailand. For other Tai groups, /*muang*, A3/ means “city” or “town”. In ancient time, it refers also to a governmental unit with a ruler of special rank.

Chinese ruled Vietnam from 111 BC to about 990 AD (Taylor, 1987, Huard 1989). Sometime during this long rule, a large number of people fled from the Chinese tax and tight ruling in the city to faraway places up in the mountains. Later, those people came to be known as the *Muong*, while the *Muong* refer to themselves as “*Mol*”. Their language is related to Vietnamese. In the *Muong* language, “*muong*” means ‘city’. In the *Muong-Viet Dictionary*, 1999, a list of more than 20 cities are cited, i.e. *Muong Lô*, *Muong Bo*, *Muong Lai*, *Muong Tli*. In Vietnamese, however, the word has acquired derogatory meanings. The word now refers to 1. unsophisticated people in far away villages and 2. villages in the mountains (*Viet-Eng Dictionary*, 1999).

It is noteworthy that “*muang*, A3” has cognate forms in Southwest Tai languages, including Thai. The word means ‘city’ or ‘town’ which is the same as that in the *Muong* language. As for the *Muong*, aside from using the word “*muong*” with the same meaning with the Tais, they also build houses in the same style as the Tais, i.e. raised platform on stilts. Moreover, *Muong* women, dress in the same style and colors with Tai women. Those people could be the Tai who shifted their language to *Muong*, before the split with Vietnam. They have retained their Tai way

is mentioned in the allegiance. ‘Luong’ could refer to either Black Tai or Muong. The title “phĩ:”, however, points to Muong rather than Black Tai. In Ahom Buranji or Ahom Chronicles “pu:,B2- phi:,A1- sâ:,C1” were leaders in far away places. The chronicles recorded that when Ahom kings went on a long trip, they rested at **phĩ:**s houses on their way.

4. The Sukhothai king’s names :- /l̥:-**thay**/, /lí-**thay**/, /lí-le:-**thay**/, /l̥:-**thay**/, /sǎy-l̥:-**thay**/
 These names, /l̥:-**thay**/, /lí-**thay**/, /lí-le:-**thay**/, /l̥:-**thay**/, and /sǎy-l̥:-**thay**/, are different from all other Thai kings’ names and they sound foreign. The names do not sound Thai despite the fact that the names have the word “Thai” in them. (All those kings also had their names in Pali, i.e. tham-ma-ra-cha:.) These names are more like ancient Vietnamese kings’ and leaders’ names. The name of the first king of the Le dynasty (980 – 1009 AD) is “Le Dai Hanh” which is very close to “Le Thai”. The names of the first and the second kings of the Ly Dynasty (1020 – 1225 AD) are “Ly Thai To” and “Ly Thai Tong” which are close to “Li Thai”.

It is noteworthy that the Sukhothai kingdom (1238 - 1438 AD) appeared at the time during which the Li and the Le dynasties faded from Vietnam. And the Later Le (1328 – 1524 AD) appeared again when Sukhothai started to fade away.

5. Coedes’ paper on L’origine Du Cycle Des Douze Animaux Au Cambodge (1935) shows that Khmer, Muong, and Vietnamese use approximately the same calendrical terms for animals. He surmised that the Khmer of Chenla kingdom? must have received the terms from the Muong around the 8th century and introduced it to Khmer proper before the 11th century. Khmer and Thai terms for the calendrical animals are also almost the same. In fact, most Thai scholars hold that the terms are from Khmer. In many Thai chronicles these terms are often referred to as “ the Khmer year”. However, the terms were already in use in the first Thai Inscription, the Ram Khamhaeng Inscription. The terms seemed to be familiar among them. Besides, there are some minor differences between the terms for the year of the horse and the year of the pig in Khmer and in Thai. They are written “ma-rong” and “kul” in Thai but “rong” and “kur” in Khmer. Also based on the discussion on the Muong and name similarities in 2 and 3 discussed above, I propose that Thai, then Tai, received the calendrical animal terms from the Muong around the Proto- Southwestern Tai period, i.e. 1,000 – 1,300 years ago.

6. Lastly but most importantly, cognates between Thai and Vietnamese are probably the strongest evidence indicating that Thai and Vietnamese had extensive contact in ancient time. The cognates are so numerous such that there are cognates under each consonant letter from A to Z in the dictionary. A lot of them are from Chinese. It is not easy to separate words originally from Chinese from words originating in the land around the Red River basin. Besides, most of them

have undergone phonetic and semantic changes. For example, Vietnamese has their own words for two ‘hai’ and three ‘ba’ but in compounds the Thai words, derived from Chinese, are used :

song ngữ	bilingual	song song	parallel
song trung	double	song thân	parents
tam công	“first three high ranking”	tam đại	“ 3 generations”
tam t à i	“the 3 colors of the flag”	tam gi á c	“ triangle”
tam gi á o	“ 3 religions”		

For words showing close Vietnamese-Thai correspondences, if there is similar Chinese vocabulary too, this may suggest that both languages have borrowed from Chinese. The case for this is especially strong for nouns denoting cultural items associated with Chinese contact.

Vietnamese		Thai
hàng	“shop”	h â :ŋ
mã	“horse”	m á a
m ù c	“ink; cuttle fish”	m ù k
nàng	“dame, damsel; woman”	na:ŋ
nan	calamity, difficulty	na:n (in y â :k-na:n)
nh í p	to stitch summarily	y é p (to sew)
n ụ	maid	n ũ : (little girl/boy)
la	mule	la:
than	“coal”	th à :n
thu ế	tax	s ù ay
y ê n	peaceful, quiet	yen

Another category includes more locally-focused items like:

anh	you	ŋ e ŋ
-----	-----	--------------------

ăn roi	consume devour voraciously mulberry	ʔa:røy	delicious
ban	mountain village	bâ:n	house, village
bang	community, state	ba:ŋ	village
bọ	“father	phô:	
ca	shift	kà	
chèo	oar	ce:w	
danh	hardened, hard	dâ:n	
eo	waist	ʔew	
gạo	rice	khâ:w	
hại	damage, harm, hurt	râ:y	
hao hán	chivalrous and magnanimous	hâ:w-hă:n	
khách	visitor, guest	khê:k	
khênh	to move by hand	khên	
khó	hard, difficult	(khěj)-khô:	
khốn(đốn)	poverty-stricken	khôn-(khé:n)	
tắc-ke	gecko	ták-ke:	
lam	to cook rice in a bamboo portion	lă:m	sticky rice cooked in bamboo portions
lò	dozen	lố:	
mẹ	“mother”	mê:	
muong	ditch	mũaŋ	
neo	direction, way	ne:w	
ni	this, now	ní:	
nì	here	ní:	

ngà	tusk	ŋa:
ngan	money, silver	ŋən
ọc	to vomit	ʔò:k
nháp	rough	yà:p
nhất	timid, shy	(kha)-yà:t (afraid)
nghé	buffaloe's calf	ŋè:
phai	trench, small ditch	fǎ:y
phái	faction, wing	fạ:y
rây	plant-lice	ray
rút	pull out, draw	rû:t
sào	pole; pillar	sǎw
thu(cá)	mackerel	thu:(pla:-)
vái	bow with joined hands	wâ:y
vọng	round	won(classifier for something round)
vọng tron	circle, ring	won - cɔ:n
xaó	turn topsy-turvy	sa:w(khâ:w)

7. Conclusion

I'd like to conclude that, from my viewpoint, Tai and Vietnamese speakers were linguistically distinct but then came to live in close contact in the Northern Vietnamese region. However, being under Chinese rule, both groups appropriated Chinese literary and cultural traditions, many involving language. Chinese cultural and linguistic forms were incorporated in different ways. For example, under Chinese rule, both groups were required to follow the traditional Chinese cyclical sexagesimal calendar, one component of which involved 12 animal names. The ancestors of Vietnamese and Muong speakers, the Proto – Viet – Muong people, adopted the

formal features of this Chinese system. However, they used their own local vocabulary to refer to the 12 calendrical animals. In the same area, the Tai speakers were a minority group, probably smaller numerically and in a non-dominant social position. They also adopted the basic form of the Chinese system, but in order to name the 12 calendrical animals, they used the vocabulary of their neighbours, the early Vietnamese-Muong speakers.

The large number of shared Chinese and local Vietnamese-Muong words that came to be used by Tai speakers too points to very close and extensive contact over a long period. The words for “father” and “mother” cannot be considered normal loanwords: every language must have their own words for these. So it is remarkable to see a Tai -Vietnamese similarity in these forms. In the same way, both Thai and Vietnamese use the same words to refer to the same two things – silver and money - /ŋən/ in Thai and /ngân/ in Vietnamese. The Vietnamese word /ngân/ appears in compound words only, however. The addressing particle / ใจ๋/ - name+ ใจ๋, or words in exclamation such as /câw ใจ๋/ are about the same in the two languages.

I would suggest that speakers of these languages lived in the same village or were in such close contact that they got to see each other and communicate every day. A good comparison is the way the Chinese in Bangkok get to communicate with their Thai neighbours today.

เอกสารอ้างอิง

Sukhothai Inscriptions, Volume 8. 2003. In Commemoration of the 200th Anniversary of King Mongkut, Phrabat Somdet Phra Chomklao Chao Yuu Hua, since his birth on October 18th, 1804).

ประชุมจารึก ภาค 8 จารึกสุโขทัย 2548 จัดพิมพ์โดยคณะกรรมการอำนวยการจัดงานเฉลิมพระเกียรติพระบาทสมเด็จพระจอมเกล้าเจ้าอยู่หัว จัดพิมพ์เป็นที่ระลึกในโอกาสวันพระบรมราชสมภพครบ 200 ปี วันที่ 18 ตุลาคม พ.ศ. 2547

Cam Trong

2010. *Thritsadi BanMuong*. Editors -Chattip Nardsubha and Pichet Sayphan. Bangkok. ทฤษฎีบ้านเมือง. นักรทพิทย์ นาคสุภา และ พิเชษฐ สายพันธ์ บรรณาธิการ กรุงเทพฯ

Diller, Anthony แอนโทนี่ ดิลเลอร์

1990, “tra-ku:n pha:sa thay: b̂n̂aŋ lǎŋ nɛ:w khít ?up-pa-lák” in **khon thay d̂:m**

m̂ay d̂:y yu: tĥi:-n̂i:, Bangkok, Muong Boran Print House.

พ.ศ. 2533. “ตระกูลภาษาไทย: เบื้องหลังแนวคิดแบบอุปลักษณ”. ใน คนไทย(เดิม)ไม่ได้อยู่ที่นี้

กรุงเทพฯ. สำนักพิมพ์เมืองโบราณ

Coedes, G.

1935. L'origine du cycle des douzes animaux au Cambodge, TP. 2e serie.,

31. pp. 315 – 329.

Gedney, William J.

1976 On the Thai Evidence for Austro-Thai. Computational Analyses of Asian and African Languages. 3:39-48. National – Inter- University Research Institute of Asian and African Languages and Cultures, Tokyo.

1994. **Gedney’s Southwestern Tai Dialects**. Ed. By Thomas John Hudak. Michigan Papers on South and Southeast Asia. No. 42. Center for South and South East Asia. The University of Michigan.

Li, Fang Kuei.

1977. A Handbok of Comparative Tai. (Oceanic Linguistics Special Publications No. 15.) Honolulu: The University of Hawaii press.

Phan, John D.

2010. “Re-Imagining “Annam””: A New Analysis of Sino- Viet – Muong Linguistic Contact. Chinese Southern Diaspora Studies. Volume 4, 2010.

Schweyer, Anne-Valerie. Paisarn Piemmettawat - Photography.

2011. Ancient Vietnam. River Books. Bangkok.

Taylor, Keith Weller.

1983. The Birth of Vietnam. Berkeley. Los Angeles. University of California Press.

London.

Vien Ngon Ngu Hoc. Tu dien Viet-Anh. Vietnamese- English Dictionary. Nha Xuat Ban TP.

Ho Chi Minh

Yong Xian, Luo.

1999. A Dictionary of Dehong, Southwestern China. Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies. The Australian National University. Canberra .

Tu dien. Viet – Anh. Vietnamese-English Dictionary. Nha Xuat Ban TP. Ho Chi minh.