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Formation of Ethnonyms in Southeast Asia

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In the Southeast Asian Sinosphere, we can observe a circulation of ethnonyms between local languages and Chinese. A local Southeast Asian autonym is borrowed into Chinese, undergoes sound changes affecting the Chinese language, and then returns to the original populations, or to other populations. The result is a coexistence of ethnonyms of highly different phonetic outlook but originating in the same etymon.

We will examine four families of ethnonyms, mostly Austroasiatic and Tai-Kadai. Some of these ethnonyms are still in use today, others are known through Chinese texts where they are transcribed by phonograms. We will use Baxter [1992] and Pulleyblank [1991] to reconstruct Old Chinese (OC) and Middle Chinese (MC) forms. The phonetic restitution of the phonograms are typeset in boxes, for clarity.

1. The *b.rak (> bái 白) or *p.rak (> bǎi 百) family

| bái 白 < MC bæk < OC *brak [b.rak] |
| bǎi 百 < MC pæk < OC *prak [p.rak] |

From these etymons originate the following ethnonyms:

1.1 Sino-Vietnamese Lac is the most ancient term to name the Vietnamese people. Lac Việt (luòyuè 離越) “population of ancient Vietnam” [Maspero 1918, p.7]; also spelled 駱 or 轒 [Madrolle 1937, p.323].

| luò 離 < MC lak < OC *C-rak [C.rak] |

Sino-Vietnamese Lac *rak results from the monosyllabization of *b.rak or *p.rak by loss of the first element in the iambic cluster.

1.2 *prok “autonym of the Wa people” and rɔ:k, “a Khmu sub-group”. In the Waic dialects [Diffloth 1980], the etymon *p.ʁɔ:k can be realized pazaŋ, paraŋ, pʰalok, etc. The shift aː > oː is attested in Bolyu [Edmondson 1995], an Austroasiatic language which has affinities with Vietic. This marked change might have existed in a larger area in South China.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“fish”</th>
<th>“house”</th>
<th>“leaf”</th>
<th>“road”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>*Waic</td>
<td>Khmu</td>
<td>Viet</td>
<td>Bolyu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kaʔ</td>
<td>kaʔ</td>
<td>cá</td>
<td>qo</td>
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<tr>
<td>naʔ</td>
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<td>hlaʔ</td>
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<td>lā</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>kraʔ</td>
<td>sá</td>
<td>kyo</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

I cordially thank Frédéric Pain (Catholic University in Leuven, Belgium), a linguist specialist in Southeast Asia, who read the text over with the greatest attention.
The filiation of \texttt{pro:k} and \texttt{ro:k} with the etymon \texttt{b.rak/\textit{p.rak}} can be proven by the vowel shift \texttt{a:} > \texttt{ɔ}.

1.3 Chinese texts from the 13th and 14th centuries inform us about populations named \textit{Bái yì 白衣} “White Clothes”, \textit{Bái yí 白夷} “White Barbarians” or \textit{Bái yí 百夷} “The Hundred Barbarians” [Luce 1958, pp.174-5, notes 11-13]. The existence of these variants suggests that the characters are used as phonograms to transcribe an ethonym, i.e. \*\textit{p.rak} or \*\textit{b.rak}. Likewise for \textit{Bái mán 白蠔} [Luce 1961, p.24]. As far as the characters \texttt{yì} “clothes” and \texttt{yí} “barbarian” are concerned, they may simply transcribe a word meaning “People” (see §2 below).

1.4 In my talk held at the 41st ICSTLL in London [Ferlus 2008], I interpreted \textit{Bāiyuè 百越} as “the Hundred Principalities”. I now think that it should be “the Principality of the \*\textit{p.rak}”.

1.5 The ethnonym \textit{Bāi/Bai (Bái-zú 白族)} is also likely to originate in \*\textit{p.rak/\textit{b.rak}}. The Bai people was formerly named Minjia (\textit{Minjiā 民家}).

Note: Nowadays, some ethnic groups in Southeast Asia and South China are named with ethnonyms including a term interpreted as “white”: White Yi, White Thai, etc. We wonder whether it had originally acted like the ethnonym \*\textit{b.rak} which, over the course of the centuries, would have been reinvested by the first meaning of its phonogram \textit{bái 白}. Thereafter, ethnonymic compounds comprising the term “black” would have been introduced to satisfy a need of harmony.

2. The \*\texttt{k.ri}: “(old name of) Tai-Kadai (peoples)” family

The alleged original form is well preserved, totally or partially, in some Mon-Khmer languages in Laos and Vietnam [Ferlus 2006].

\texttt{ri}: refers to the Lao in the Kenieng language (Khmuic, Houa Phan province, Laos).

\texttt{raj} refers to the Tay/Tai (here \textit{Tây Mường}) in the \textit{Odu/Ռdu} language (Khmuic, Nghệ An province, Vietnam).

\texttt{yì}: \texttt{(yì:<\*ri:)} designates the Tay/Tai (here Black Tay) in the Kesing Mul language (Khmuic, Sơn La province, Vietnam).

\texttt{kəri}: in the expression Maleng Kari \textit{məleŋ kəri}, autonym for the Kha Phong (Vietic, Quảng Bình province, Vietnam), in which Maleng means “Human being, person, people”.

The three words, \texttt{raj, ri} and \texttt{yì}, clearly means “Tai/Thai speaking population”. This meaning is probably the same in the expression Maleng Kari \textit{məleŋ kəri}, that can be interpreted “Maleng (who lives near) Lao”, the same pattern found in Maleng Brô \textit{məleŋ bru}: “Maleng (who lives near of) Bru”, the autonym of a neighbouring Katuic population (Khammuon province, Laos). In a wider sense, the specifying term \textit{Kari} is also used in its Vietnamese form \textit{Tị}, to name the \textit{Tia Rị}, or \textit{Chà Ly}, a local branch of the Bru (Katuic, Quảng Bình and Quảng Trị provinces).

To explain the phonetic shifts from the original forms to the modern terms we just have to use some simple sound shifts attested in Chinese and in the Sinospheric at large.

- Vowel shift \texttt{-i:} > \texttt{-aj}
- Dialectal random shift \texttt{r-} > \texttt{l-}
- Regular shift of \texttt{l} (medial or initial) from OC to MC [Baxter 1992]:
  1. Medial in tense sesquisyllable: OC \texttt{-l-} > MC \texttt{d-}
  2. Initial in lax monosyllable: OC \texttt{l-} > MC \texttt{j-}
- Regular shift r- > l- from OC to MC
- Loss of the first syllable in sesquisyllables

From the *k.ri:* etymology originates the following ethnonyms:

2.1 Hlai tai, or Lai, is the autonym of a Kadai population (Tai-Kadai family), located in Hainan (Guangdong). According to Matisoff [1988: 289, note 3], who reconstructed Proto-
Hlai initials and tones, i- would be a voiceless lateral spirant which determines high series
tones. Thus, this initial must originate in a cluster of plosive+1. Etymologically, the form tai
perfectly results from kri: by a succession of typologically well-known changes: kri: > kʰlï: > ti: > taj. These shifts needn’t to be explained by a remodelling through the
Chinese language.

2.2 Li (ľí 俚, ǐ 黎) is the name given to the Hlai by Chinese. This ethnic naming
appears in the Han dynastic records [HCTE, VI §2] and also during the Sông period.

\[
\begin{align*}
ľí 俚 &< MC liX < OC *C-riʔ [riʔ] \\
ǐ 黎 &< MC lej < OC *C-rij [C.ri]
\end{align*}
\]

2.3 Tai/Thai (or Tay/Thay), from Proto-Thai daj\(^A\) (< *daj), is the autonym of
populations of the Tai branch (Li Fangkuei’s Southwestern Tai) and of the Tai branch
(LFK’s Central Tai). It is absent from the Yay branch (LFK’s Northern Tai). Its formation
can be explained by changes specific to Chinese on the basis of a dialectal alternation
kši: > kódi:/kódaŋ (-l- > -d- in tense sesquisyllable) > di:/daj (loss of first syllable)>
daj\(^A\) (Proto-Thai) which evolved to tʰaj\(^A\) in Thai/Siamese and in Lao and to taj\(^A\)2 (in
other Tai languages).

Note: a deeply rooted belief in Thailand has it that the term ‘Thai’ derives from the last
syllables -daya in Sukhodaya/ Sukhothay (สุกทะยา), the name of the first Thai Kingdom. The
spelling emphasizes this prestigious etymology by writing لن (transliterated ai-d-y) to
designate the Thai/Siamese people, while the form لن (transliterated ai-d) is occasionally
used to refer to Tai/Thai speaking ethnic groups. Lao writes لن (transliterated ai-d) in both
cases.

2.4 Yi, spelled yí 畢 or 夷, an ethnic naming of some Tibeto-Burman groups, may
originate in the etymology *k.ri:* by the shift l- > j- (lax monosyllable) specific to Chinese.

\[
yí 畢 < MC yij [ji] < OC *ljij [li]
\]

The interpretation of the ethnonym ‘Yi’ as a member of the *k.ri:* family remains
speculative, however it is not as firmly established as for Hlai and Tai/Thai.

3. The Kraw *k.ra:w* family

From the etymology *k.ra:w* originate the following ethnonyms:

3.1 Gelao : autonym of a Kadai population scattered from Guizhōu (China) to North
Vietnam.

3.2 Lao: ethnonym and autonym of the Lao people (ลาว); nationality of the inhabitants
of Laos. Formed by the monosyllabilization of the etymology *k.raw.* The peoples named Lao
(lào 獸), supposed to be the ancestors of Lao and some other Tai-Kadai populations, settled
in the upper Tonkin and in parts of Yunnan and Guizhou during the Tang times [Pelliot
1904, p.136].
lǎo 獠 < MC lawX < OC *Craw? [C.raw]

This reconstruction of the pronunciation for the phonogram 獠 confirms that ‘Lao’ originates in the etymon *kraw.

3.3 Sino-Vietnamese Giao, in Kiao-tche/ Giao Chi (jiǎo zhī 交趾) “ancient name of Vietnam”, has been attested since 207 BC [Lê Thành Khôi 1981, p.66], subsequently to Lạc (see 1.1).

jiǎo 交 < MC kæw < OC *kraw [k.raw]

The expression Giao Chi is represented by Catti- in Ptolemy’s Cattigara, and by Cochi- in Cochinchina, one of the names for the Đại Việt transmitted by the Portuguese.

3.4 Keo/Kiew ke:w^1 (羌), an ethnonym formerly given to the Vietnamese by the Lao, currently slightly derogatory. In Pupeo (Kadai branch), on the other hand kew is used to name the Tây of North-Vietnam. This ethnonym comes from the MC form of *kraw.

4. The *-raŋ ‘Human being, person’ family

It can be identified in the following expressions:

4.1 Sino-Vietnamese Ván-Lang (wén lǎng 文郎), name of a province and its population south of the territory of the Giao Chi, also North Vietnam (Táng dynasty) [Maspero 1918]. This province might have been located in the centre of Laos.

lǎng 郎 < MC lang < OC *C-rang [C.raŋ]

4.2 T’ang-míng/ Táng-míng 堂明: according to the Records of Three Kingdoms (sānguózhì 三國誌), the T’ang-míng was a state situated in the north of Cambodia. A Chinese author from the 13th century identified this T’ang-míng with the Tao-míng/ Dào míng 道明 of the Táng times, also located in the north of Cambodia [Hoshino 1985, p.32].

míng 明 < MC mjæŋ < OC *mrjang [m.raŋ]

4.3 Maleng: autonym of an endangered Vietic sub-group scattered on the Nakai plateau, in the centre of Laos. This ethnic naming can be identified to *m.raŋ through the iambic late form *m.ļeq.

4.4 Maleň/ Malyāñ: these terms, attested in the Old Khmer epigraphy, point to a country (and its inhabitants) situated south to the Great Lake. The Pre-Angkorian Maleň, reconstructed as *mōliŋ, is attested in the 7th century; the Angkorian malyāñ *mōlieq had been attested from the 9th to the 11th century [Jenner 2009a, 2009b]. The Maleň/ Malyāñ kingdom was subjected by Jayavarman II in the 8th century. We don’t know anything about the language spoken by this population. There is an obvious phonetic relationship between the epigraphic Maleň/ Malyāñ and the Maleng in Laos, but we cannot draw any conclusion from this comparison.

4.5 Mraïmā: the Burmese epigraphy attest two variants for the ancient name of Burma, mraimā (since 1190) which have remained until today, and mraîmā (1342) [Luce 1959, p.53]. The base of the latter, mraim- (in which mainwindow, is transcribed with the phonograms mû-lăng 木淽 [Luce 1958, p.106].

lăng 滄 < MC laŋ < OC *C-rang [C.raŋ]
We might think that the validity of the late form \( mra\tilde{m}(m) \) is uncertain, as it is rarer than the normal form \( mran(m) \), but its transcription in Chinese is in perfect conformity with its spelling in Old Burmese.

4.6 Orang/Urang *ʔuraŋ “Human being, person” [Dyen & McFarland 1979; Wurm & Wilson 1975]. Although attributed to Proto Austronesian by some authors, the forms resulting from this etymon remain limited to the Malayic area (Melayu, Minangkabau, Madurese). It is difficult to place *ʔuraŋ in one of the linguistic families in Southeast Asia.

5. Conclusions

The first observation that emerges from this survey is that there is considerable phonetic variety within each family of ethnonyms.

Among the four fundamental etymons, only \(*k.ri:\) has been fully preserved until today, coexisting with its daughter forms Hlai/Li and Tai/Thai which name Tai-Kadai populations (leaving aside the dubious case of ‘Yi’).

The use of the daughter forms of \(*k.raw\) is common to Tai-Kadai (Gelao, Lao) and to Austroasiatic ancestors of the Vietnamese.

The etymon \(*p.rak/b.rak\) is mainly associated with Austroasiatic populations, and secondarily with Tibeto-Burman ethnic groups. It can be hypothesized that this situation reflects a spread of Tibeto-Burman languages over an Austroasiatic substratum.

The etymon \(*-raŋ\) is shared between the Asian mainland and the Western Indonesian world. It is attested today in three linguistic families: Tibeto-Burman, Austroasiatic and Austronesian.

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