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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

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 絹 [Madrolle 1937, p.323].

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 *proːk “autonym of the Wa people” and roːk, “a Khmu sub-group”. In the Waic dialects [Diffloth 1980], the etymon *p.roːk can be realized pəzaŋk, paraʊk, 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></th>
<th>Waic</th>
<th>Khmu</th>
<th>Viet</th>
<th>Bolyu</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“fish”</td>
<td>kaʔ</td>
<td>kaʔ</td>
<td>cá</td>
<td>qo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“house”</td>
<td>naʔ</td>
<td>nhà</td>
<td>pə</td>
<td>pə</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“leaf”</td>
<td>hlaʔ</td>
<td>hlaʔ</td>
<td>lá</td>
<td>lọ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“road”</td>
<td>kraʔ</td>
<td>sá</td>
<td>kyo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</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 *p.rak and *b.rak with the etymon *b.rak/*p.rak can be proven by the vowel shift a: > o:.

1.3 Chinese texts from the 13th and 14th centuries inform us about populations named Bái yì 衣 “White Clothes”, Bái yì 白夷 “White Barbarians” or Bái yí 白夷 “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 ethnonym, i.e. *p.rak or *b.rak. Likewise for Bái mán 白蠻 [Luce 1961, p.24]. As far as the characters yì 衣 “clothes” and yí 夷 “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 Bāiyuè 百越 as “the Hundred Principalities”. I now think that it should be “the Principality of the *p.rak”.

1.5 The ethnonym Baï/Bai (Báizú 白族) is also likely to originate in *p.rak/*b.rak. The Bai people was formerly named Minjia (Minjiă 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 *b.rak which, over the course of the centuries, would have been reinvested by the first meaning of its phonogram bái 白. Thereafter, ethnonymic compounds comprising the term “black” would have been introduced to satisfy a need of harmony.

2. The *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].

- *ri: refers to the Lao in the Kenieng language (Khmuic, Houa Phan province, Laos).
- *raj refers to the Tay/Tai (here Tày Mường) in the Òdu/Õdu language (Khmuic, Nghiê An province, Vietnam).
- *yí: (yí:<*ri:) designates the Tay/Tai (here Black Tay) in the Kesing Mul language (Khmuic, Sông La province, Vietnam).
- *kɔri: in the expression Maleng Kari mɔleŋ kɔri:, autonym for the Kha Phong (Vietic, Quảng Bình province, Vietnam), in which Maleng means “Human being, person, people”.

The three words, *raj, *ri: and *yí:, clearly means “Tai/Thai speaking population”. This meaning is probably the same in the expression Maleng Kari mɔleŋ kɔri:, that can be interpreted “Maleng (who lives near) Lao”, the same pattern found in Maleng Brô mɔleŋ bru: “Maleng (who lives near of) Bru”, the autonym of a neighbouring Katuic population (Khammuon province, Laos). In a wider sense, the specifying term Kari is also used in its Vietnamese form Trị, to name the Tia Rì, or Chà Lý, 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 -i: >-aj
- Dialectal random shift r- > l-
- Regular shift of l (medial or initial) from OC to MC [Baxter 1992]:
  1. Medial in tense sesquisyllable : OC -l-> MC d-
  2. Initial in lax monosyllable : OC l- > MC j-
- Regular shift r- > l- from OC to MC
- Loss of the first syllable in sesquisyllables

From the *k.́ri: etymology originate 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, ิ- would be a voiceless lateral spirant which determines high series tones. Thus, this initial must originate in a cluster of pllosive+1. Etymologically, the form tai perfectly results from kri: by a succession of typologically well-known changes: kri: > kʰli: > ti: > taj. These shifts needn’t to be explained by a remodelling through the Chinese language.

2.2 Li (Lǐ 厲, Lí 黎) is the name given to the Hlai by Chinese. This ethnic naming appears in the Hans dynastic records [HCTE, VI §2] and also during the Song period.

\[
\begin{align*}
Lǐ 厲 &< MC liX < OC *C-rij? [ri?] \\
Lí 黎 &< MC lej < OC *C-rij [C.́ri]
\end{align*}
\]

2.3 Tai/Thai (or Tay/Thay), from Proto-Thai daj^A (< *daj), is the autonym of populations of the Thai 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 k̆liː > k̆diː/ k̆daj (˦-˦ in tense sesquisyllable) > diː daj (loss of first syllable) > daj^A (Proto-Thai) which evolved to tʰaj^A2 in Thai/Siamese and in Lao and to taj^A2 (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/ Sukhothai (สุโขทัย), the name of the first Thai Kingdom. The spelling emphasizes this prestigious etymology by writing ln (transliterated ai-d-y) to designate the Thai/Siamese people, while the form ln (transliterated ai-d) is occasionally used to refer to Tai/Thai speaking ethnic groups. Lao writes ln (transliterated ai-d) in both cases.

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

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

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.́raw family

From the etymon *k.́raw originate the following ethnonyms:

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

3.2 Lao: ethnonym and autonym of the Lao people (לָאו); nationality of the inhabitants of Laos. Formed by the monosyllabization of the etymon *k.́raw. The peoples named Lao (lào 猿), 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 Táng times [Pelliot 1904, p.136].
lǎo 獼 < MC law < OC *C-raw? [C.raw?]

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

3.3 Sino-Vietnamese Giao, in Kiào-tche/ Giao Chí (jiào 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).

jiào 交 < MC kæw < OC *kraw [k.raw]

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

3.4 Keo/Kañ  kæwA¹ ( العراق) : an ethnonym formerly given to the Vietnamese by the Lao, currently slightly derogatory. In Pupeo (Kadai branch), on the other hand  kæw is used to name the Tay 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 láng 文郎), name of a province and its population south of the territory of the Giao Chí, also North Vietnam (Táng dynasty) [Maspero 1918]. This province might have been located in the centre of Laos.

láng 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/ Dao míng 道明 of the Táng times, also located in the north of Cambodia [Hoshino 1986, 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.leŋ.

4.4 Maleñ/Malyañ: these terms, attested in the Old Khmer epigraphy, point to a country (and its inhabitants) situated south to the Great Lake. The Pre-Angkorian Maleñ, reconstructed as *mōliaŋ, is attested in the 7th century; the Angkorian malyañ *mōlicŋ had been attested from the 9th to the 11th century [Jenner 2009a, 2009b]. The Maleñ/Malyañ 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 Maleñ/Malyañ and the Maleng in Laos, but we cannot draw any conclusion from this comparison.

4.5 Mraímā: the Burmese epigraphy attest two variants for the ancient name of Burma, mrañmā (since 1190) which have remained until today, and  mraímā (1342) [Luce 1959, p.53]. The base of the latter,  mrañ- (in which ẖ has the same value as ɲ), is transcribed with the phonograms mū-lang 木浪 [Luce 1958, p.106].

lāng 浪 < MC lan < OC *C-rang [*C.raŋ]
We might think that the validity of the late form mraṇ(mā) is uncertain, as it is rarer than the normal form mraṇ(mā), 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.riː 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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