

Tai Words and the Place of the Tai in the Vietnamese Past

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Introduction

In 1479, Vietnamese historian Ngô Sĩ Liên completed a history called the *Complete Book of the Historical Records of Đại Việt* (hereafter, “*Complete Book*”). Based on two earlier histories, one of which was drafted in the 13th century and the other shortly before Ngô Sĩ Liên compiled his own text, the *Complete Book* was the first Vietnamese history to begin in distant antiquity and to discuss people and events in the Red River Delta prior to the advent of Chinese rule in the region. Specifically, the *Complete Book* records that before the Qin Dynasty incorporated this region into its empire in 111 B.C.E., there had existed a kingdom called Văn Lang which had been ruled over by figures known as the Hùng kings. The *Complete Book* also describes the geographical extent of Văn Lang and relates that initially after the first Hùng king had come to power, he had,

置相曰貉侯，將曰貉將. . . 王子曰官郎，王女曰媚娘。有司曰蒲正，世世以父傳子，曰父道。世主皆號雄王。

. . . established ministers called *lạc* marquises, and generals called *lạc* generals. . . The princes were called *quan lang*, and princesses were called *my nương*. Officials were called *bồ chính*. From one generation to the next fathers passed [positions] on to their sons. This is called the way of the father [*phụ đạo*]. The ruler of each generation was called King Hùng.¹

I have transliterated the Vietnamese pronunciation for some of the characters in this passage, rather than translate them from the original classical Chinese, because for anyone familiar with that language, it is clear that these are not standard classical Chinese terms. Indeed, there is something alien about these terms, and if we are to believe Ngô Sĩ Liên that these are words which were used some 2,000 years before he compiled his history, then it is clear that the strangeness of these terms is a result of their antiquity.

¹ Ngô Sĩ Liên 吳士連, *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* 大越史記全書 [Complete Book of the Historical Records of Đại Việt], (1697 ed.), A.3, Ngoại kí 1/3a.

How though did Ngô Sĩ Liên know the names for government positions which had existed say 2,000 years earlier? This is a question which appears not to have concerned scholars in Vietnam for hundreds of years after this information was first recorded. That changed, however, in the second half of the 20th century when Vietnamese scholars in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), or North Vietnam, attempted to create a new history for their nation in the post-colonial era. Over the course of the 1950s and 1960s, scholars in the DRV sought to create a history which fit the standards of “scientific” (*khoa học*) scholarship, and that required explaining how terms could appear in a text some 2,000 years after they were supposedly used.

These scholars argued that these terms had been transmitted orally through the centuries. While some were aware that oral transmission is far from exact, they nonetheless attempted to buttress their position with “scientific” reasoning. Historian Trần Quốc Vượng, for instance, noted in general that, “A law of psychology is that the things which should be forgotten are all forgotten, and that which is passed on and remembered by the people is a deep memory.”² Linguist Hoàng Thị Châu meanwhile noted more specifically with regard to these terms that while information tends to change when it is transmitted orally, the fact that these ancient titles had an alien feel to them at the time that Ngô Sĩ Liên recorded them in the 15th century was a sign that this information had been collected “objectively” (*khách quan*) and recorded in an “exact” (*chính xác*) manner.³

Vietnamese scholars at that time therefore argued that these terms definitely dated from before the common era, and this is a position which has largely held. Further, the scholars at that time argued that these terms came from the “ancient Việt language” (*tiếng cổ Việt*) which was supposedly spoken in the Red River Delta at that time. As we will see below, scholars argued that this ancient language was somehow common to people with whom we today associate such diverse language families as Mon-Khmer, Tai-Kadai, and Austronesian.⁴ More recently, however, some have argued that these titles are primarily from a Tai language, without clearly explaining why the rulers of an ancient kingdom in “Vietnam” would have used Tai words.⁵

² Trần Quốc Vượng, “Về danh hiệu ‘Hùng Vương’” [On the title, “Hùng king”], in *Hùng Vương dựng nước* [Hùng kings build the nation], vol. III (Hanoi: Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1973), 354.

³ Hoàng Thị Châu, “Vài nét về tổ chức của xã hội Văn Lang qua tài liệu ngôn ngữ học” [A few comments on the social organization of Văn Lang as seen from linguistic materials], in *Hùng Vương dựng nước* [Hùng kings build the nation], Vol. 1 (Hà Nội: Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1970): 147.

⁴ For an example, see, Hoàng Thị Châu, “Tim hiểu từ ‘phụ đạo’ trong truyền thuyết về Hùng Vương” [Understanding the word “phụ đạo” in legends about the Hùng Kings], *Nghiên cứu lịch sử* 102 (1967): 22-28.

⁵ For a representative work, see, Hoang Luong, “Historical Evidence and the Legacy of the Traditional Tai Socio-Political System in Vietnam,” *Tai Culture* 17 (2004): 43-47. In referring to speakers of Tai languages, Vietnamese scholars use the term “Tày Thái.” “Tày” refers to the

I will argue in this paper that some of these terms can clearly be linked to words used by Tai-speaking peoples. And while it may be the case that in the first millennium B.C.E. there were some proto-Tai-speaking peoples living in the Red River Delta or at least in contact with people in that region, I will also argue that there is no evidence that the above terms from the *Complete Book* actually date from that period. Instead, I will contend that they most likely date from the 15th century when Ngô Sĩ Liêm compiled his historical chronicle. I will also consider why Ngô Sĩ Liêm included terms spoken by Tai-speaking peoples in his history. Ultimately, I will argue that the inclusion of these terms is a mark of the changing relations between the Vietnamese and the Tai at that time, as the Vietnamese came to dominate their Tai neighbors. These words therefore reflect an elite Vietnamese view of where the Tai “fit” in the Vietnamese world in the 15th century.

Several centuries later, in the second half of the 20th century, Vietnamese scholars also used Tai words to argue for a place for the Tai in Vietnamese history. The place where they envisioned the Tai, however, was very different from that which Ngô Sĩ Liêm had suggested. These are thus the topics that this paper will examine. It will consist of both an investigation of the ways in which scholars, particularly Vietnamese scholars, have sought to understand the place of the Tai in Vietnamese history through their investigations of certain Tai words, and then it will attempt to provide a new explanation based on this same linguistic evidence.

The Tai on the periphery of the Vietnamese past

Modern scholars have long recognized that historically there was significant contact between Tai-speaking peoples and the people whom we today refer to as the Vietnamese. As early as 1912, the French Sinologist, Henri Maspero, saw so much evidence of linguistic contact that he argued that the Vietnamese language was a Tai language. Maspero felt that the Vietnamese language must have been formed in a geographic area which was at the borders of areas where one found speakers of Mon-Khmer, Tai and Chinese languages, and that Vietnamese was influenced by all of these languages, and perhaps other languages as well. Nonetheless, Maspero attributed particular importance to Tai, and concluded his study by noting that “the language whose dominant influence gave Annamite [i.e., Vietnamese] its modern form was certainly, in my opinion, a Thai language, and it is, I think, with the Thai

groups which speak Central Tai languages like Nung, and who live along what is today the Sino-Vietnamese border, while “Thái” refers to speakers of Southwestern Tai languages, such as the Black Tai, and who live in what is today the northwestern part of Vietnam. In this paper I use the term “Tai” as a general term to refer to speakers of any language in the Tai family of languages. However, in discussing the work of Vietnamese scholars I will sometimes employ their terminology, particularly when they make a distinction between the Tày and Thái.

family that the Annamite language must be attached.”⁶

In addition to seeing Vietnamese as a Tai language, Maspero also saw certain Tai peoples as representatives of what we might label East Asian antiquity. In an essay entitled “The Society and Religion of the Ancient Chinese and of the Modern Tai”, Maspero compared the lives, festivals, religion, myths and funeral customs of the Black Tai and White Tai who lived in the mountains between Vietnam and Laos in the early 20th century with the same elements in ancient China. Ultimately, Maspero argued that the world which we can see in ancient Chinese texts like the *Classic of Poetry* (*Shijing*) closely resembles the world of the Black Tai and White Tai, and that these two peoples therefore represent a common world of antiquity which subsequently was largely lost to various cultural and social developments.⁷

In other words, to Maspero the Tai were an important people, but that importance lay somewhere in the distant past. The parallels which he saw between the life of the Black Tai and White Tai in the mountains of the Indochinese Peninsula and the lifestyle of the ancient Chinese as revealed in the *Classic of Poetry* were a clear sign of their antiquity. Further, his study of languages also revealed to him that the Tai family of languages had given rise to Vietnamese. However, Maspero was unable to clearly historicize this process. As a result, he placed the Tai in Vietnamese history, but their position lay at some indeterminate place in the past.

Maspero’s general sense of the role of the Tai in the Vietnamese past was echoed in the works of two Chinese historians, Xu Songshi and Chen Jinghe. Xu Songshi was a scholar who engaged in historical research on the Cantonese in particular, and southern China more generally. In the first half of the 20th century, scholars were well aware that in antiquity southern China had been multiethnic, and that one of the groups which had been present there consisted of Tai speakers.⁸ Xu Songshi contributed to this understanding in a 1946 work entitled *Research on the Dai, Zhuang and Yue* (“Yue” here refers to the Cantonese). In this study, Xu Songshi points out that there were various place names in southern China and extending into northern Vietnam which came from Zhuang, a Tai language. For instance, he states that there were many place names which began with the character “gu” (古), or “cō” in Vietnamese, a term which he argues came from Zhuang and has been interpreted in many ways, from meaning “I,” to a classifier, to meaning a mountain with no vegetation on it. He also mentions that such place names could be found in the past from Anhui Province, in what is today central China, to Guangxi Province in the

⁶ Henri Maspero, “Études sur la phonétique historique de la langue Annamite: les initiales,” *Bulletin de l’École française d’Extrême-Orient* 12 (1912): 118.

⁷ Henri Maspero, *Taoism and Chinese Religion*, trans., Frank A. Kierman, Jr. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 199-247.

⁸ See, for instance, Wolfram Eberhard, *The Local Cultures of South and East China*, trans. Alide Eberhard (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1968). This work was first published in German in 1942.

southwest, an area which he argues Tai speakers historically inhabited.⁹

Xu Songshi also cites a work which was published in 1877, Xu Yanxu's *Brief Compilation on Vietnam*, which reportedly contains a map of the districts in Vietnam when it was under Chinese control in the early 15th century.¹⁰ This map apparently lists place names in what is today northern Vietnam such as the following: Cô Bàng (古榜), Cô Lão (古老), Cô Lễ (古禮), Cô Dũng (古勇), Cô Long (古龍), Cô Phí (古費), Cô Đặng (古藤), Cô Hồng (古宏), Cô Lôi (古雷), Cô Bình (古平), Cô Đặng (古鄧), Cô Xã (古社), and Cô Nông (古農). Additionally, Xu Songshi states that characters such as *tư/si* (思), *đô/du* (都), *đa/duo* (多), *na/na* (那), *bô/bu* (布), and *điều/diao* (調) also represent Zhuang words, and that in Vietnam during the 15th century there were also place names with these characters, such as the following: Na Ngạn (那岸), Lục Na (陸那), Đa Cẩm (多錦), Đa Dực (多翌), Tur Dung (思容), Điều An (調安), and Bố Chân (布真).¹¹ Unfortunately, Xu Songshi did not state what these other terms might have meant in Zhuang, although anyone familiar with a Tai language can tell that “*na/na*” is the term for a field.

While Xu Songshi therefore indicated that there was historically a strong Tai presence in the Red River Delta, he did not provide a clear historical explanation for how this happened. He noted that at that time, 1946, there were some 200,000 speakers of Tai languages in Vietnam, and he said that many of these had started to migrate into the region as early as the time of the Han Dynasty.¹² However, in 1946 these Tai peoples lived mainly in the mountains, whereas the Tai place names which Xu Shongshi listed came from areas in the Red River Delta stretching southward towards central Vietnam. Hence, Xu Songshi left a great deal unexplained about the Tai presence in Vietnamese history.

Shortly after Xu Songshi published the above study, a young Japanese-educated scholar from Taiwan by the name of Chen Jinghe pursued this issue of seemingly Tai place names in Vietnam. Chen Jinghe added still more place names which began with *cô/gu*, or characters which sounded similar, such as *cư/ju* (巨), to Xu Songshi's list by examining a Vietnamese text from 1335, Lê Tắc's *Brief Treatise on An Nam*. This text lists the names of some villages in the area of what is today north-central Vietnam, among which are the following: Cô Đặng (古藤), Cô Hoằng (古弘), Cô Chiến (古戰), Cự Lại (巨賴), and Cự Lam (巨藍).¹³

Chen then proceeds through a detailed discussion of this term, *cô* or *cự*,

⁹ Xu Songshi 徐松石, *Daizu, Zhuangzu, Yuezu kao* 泰族俚族粵族考 [Research on the Tai, Zhuang and Yue] (Yongning, Zhonghua shuju, 1946), 208-9.

¹⁰ Xu Yanxu 徐延旭 *Yuenan jilue* 越南輯略 [Brief Compilation on Vietnam], (1877).

¹¹ Xu Songshi, 131.

¹² Ibid., 132.

¹³ Chen Jinghe 陳莉和, “Yuenan Dongjing difang zhi techeng ‘kè’” 越南東京地方之特稱“Kè” [The unique name “kè” in the Tonkin region of Vietnam], *Guoli Taiwan daxue wen shi zhe xuebao* 國力臺灣大學文史哲學報 1 (1950): 223-224. Lê Tắc 黎剛, *An Nam chí lược* 安南志略 [Brief treatise on An Nam], (Siku quanshu ed., orig. comp., 1333) 1/2b-5a.

and ultimately argues that it means “person” or “people.” He then examines the vocabularies of various Tai languages, as well as Cham, Khmer and Mon, and finds that in many Tai languages there are words for “person” which begin with a “k” sound, such as *khon* in modern Central Thai. From this observation, Chen argues that term *cő* or *cư* is the Vietnamese version of an ancient shared term.¹⁴ He does not say that Tai were present in the Red River Delta, but that the Vietnamese brought this term with them as they migrated southward into the region, following an accepted understanding at the time that the Vietnamese had originally migrated southward into the region from areas in southern China. In other words, like Maspero, Chen Jinghe envisioned an important connection between the Tai and Vietnamese, but it was a connection which lay somewhere in the distant past, before Vietnamese history really began.

This idea that there was an extremely close connection between Tai languages and Vietnamese, as Maspero had argued, is a position which was eventually challenged in the 1950s by French scholar André-Georges Haudricourt. What Haudricourt suggested, and what scholars since that time have come to agree upon, is that Vietnamese is a Mon-Khmer language.¹⁵ Vietnamese and Tai are therefore very different languages. However, the Vietnamese language shows undeniable signs of contact with Tai languages, and therefore Haudricourt’s finding still left open the question of the nature and history of that contact.

Tai-Vietnamese mixing

In the 1950s, after Vietnam gained independence from French colonial rule, some Vietnamese scholars, particularly in the North, under the DRV, began to examine this issue of the historical connections between the Tai and the Vietnamese. In the 1950s and 1960s, historians in the DRV repeatedly urged each other to make new advances in historical scholarship by engaging with the work of linguists, ethnologists and archaeologists. It is through this engagement with other fields—particularly linguistics and ethnology—that Vietnamese scholars in the North touched on the issue of Tai-speaking people in Vietnamese history. Further, scholars at that time worked within a larger political discourse which sought to incorporate minority peoples into the narrative of the Vietnamese nation. This project was complex and at times contradictory, but it served as the general atmosphere in which scholars worked.¹⁶

¹⁴ Chen Jinghe, 225-229.

¹⁵ For an overview of the scholarship and debates on the linguistic origins of Vietnamese, see Mark Alves, “Linguistic Research on the Origins of the Vietnamese Language: An Overview,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1.1-2 (2006): 104-130.

¹⁶ For an examination of this effort to incorporate minorities into the narrative of the nation, see Patricia Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam: New Histories of the National Past* (Durham: Duke

One early work by a Vietnamese scholar, which discussed the role of the Tai in Vietnamese history, was Vuong Hoang Tuyen's *Peoples of Austroasiatic Origin in the Northern Region of Vietnam*. Published in 1963, this study combined insights from fields such as ethnology and linguistics to discuss the Tai and other ethnic groups. In this book, Vuong Hoang Tuyen first examines ethnographic evidence, and demonstrates that the Vietnamese share certain cultural practices, beliefs and types of material culture with both Austroasiatic and Tai (Thái is the term he uses throughout) peoples. Among the examples he cites are houses on stilts, certain decorations placed at the ends of roofs, the practices of chewing betel nut and dying one's teeth, tattooing, and the technique of pounding rice in a container by using a long wooden pestle. As for beliefs, Vuong Hoang Tuyen notes that all of these peoples traditionally held a reverence for rice, a fact which one can ascertain from the images on ancient bronze drums which he argues are also a shared element in the material cultures of Austroasiatic and Tai peoples.¹⁷

Vuong Hoang Tuyen then turns to discuss certain cultural practices which are only shared by the Vietnamese and Tai. Here he mentions the worship of dragons as totems, the ritual of honoring a midwife, similar clothing styles among Vietnamese and Tai women, and the custom of holding boat races at the beginning of the year. In addition to these common elements, Vuong Hoang Tuyen argues that certain place names also point to a historical connection between the Tai and the Vietnamese. In particular, Vuong Hoang Tuyen notes that there are many place names in northern Vietnam which contain the term “*mường*.” In areas inhabited by Tai there are names like Mường La and Mường Lay, while areas where the ethnic Mường live in Hòa Bình Province have names like Mường Vang, and Mường Bi.

Based on this evidence, Vuong Hoang Tuyen argues that these place names show that in the distant past the Vietnamese were influenced by Tai culture. He likens this to what he sees as the later influence of the Chinese (or what he calls Hán). Just as the Chinese establishment of administrative control over the region left its mark in place names, so does the continued existence of the term “*mường*” indicate that there was contact between Tai and Vietnamese prior to that point.¹⁸

Having examined these ethnographic ties between the Vietnamese, Tai, and other peoples, Vuong Hoang Tuyen then turns to linguistics. He examines what were then the competing views of the categorization of Vietnamese, Maspero's claim that it was a Tai language and Haudricourt's that it was Austroasiatic, and sides with Haudricourt. Nonetheless, Vuong Hoang Tuyen still argues that historically there was a special relationship between the Tai and Vietnamese languages. He says that this is a relationship which scholars had not studied adequately. He therefore tries to

University Press, 2002), 69-112.

¹⁷ Vuong Hoang Tuyen, *Các dân tộc nguồn gốc Nam-Á ở miền bắc Việt Nam* [Peoples of Austroasiatic origin in the northern region of Vietnam] (Hà Nội: Giáo dục, 1963), 160-166.

¹⁸ Ibid., 166-169.

give a sense of this connection by indicating certain areas where Vietnamese and Tai clearly shared vocabulary. Vương Hoàng Tuyên did not write any of the Tai terms in a Tai script. He simply used the modern Vietnamese script, *quốc ngữ*, to transcribe Tai terms. This makes it difficult at times to check the accuracy of his claims. I have provided some of his examples below and added in parentheses the English meanings of terms, as well as possible Black Tai equivalents in brackets, as this is the closest Tai language to those Vương Hoàng Tuyên was likely dealing with for which there is relatively clear documentation.¹⁹

1) Words which reveal certain aspects about the economy at a particular stage of development.

cày (to plow, cultivate) = *thay* [BT, *thay*]

bầu (gourd) = *pâu* [BT, *tảo*]

chuối (banana) = *khuối* [BT, *cuối*]

2) Words which represent conditions of life corresponding to the level of an already developed economy.

bát (bowl) = *pát* [BT, *thuối*]²⁰

đũa (chopsticks) = *thúua* [BT, *thú*]²¹

ninh (to stew, braise, boil for a long time) = *ninh* [BT, ?]

3) Words which reveal complex concepts from life.

boi (to row, paddle) = *poi* [BT, *bái*, *pái*]

bit (to cover) = *pít* [BT, ?]

nợ (debt, to owe) = *nợ*, *ni* [BT, *ni*]

After presenting the first three words (plow, gourd and banana), Vương Hoàng Tuyên notes that the use of a plow represents an advanced stage of agriculture. He also states that historical and archaeological information indicate that the use of plows only began in the late first millennium B.C.E., around the time the Chinese established their rule in the region, and he comments that an ancient plow had recently

¹⁹ Ibid., 188-189. The reference I am using is Baccam Don, et. al., *Tai Dam – English/English – Tai Dam Vocabulary Book* (Eastlake, CO: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1989).

²⁰ It looks like Vương Hoàng Tuyên is probably using a word which refers specifically to a monk's bowl, and is a Pali term.

²¹ Note that Cheah Yanchong has suggested that the Tai term for chopsticks may come from an old Chinese word, *zhu* (箸). See his "More Thoughts on the Ancient Culture of the Tai People," *Journal of the Siam Society* 84.1 (1996): 42-43.

been discovered in Yên Bái Province, to the northwest of the Red River Delta, in an area inhabited by Tai peoples. This information, and his earlier comment about how the continued use of the term “muòng” was similar to the way in which Chinese-established place names also continued to be used, make it obvious that Vuong Hoàng Tuyễn thinks that it was the Tai who came and influenced the Vietnamese. Indeed, he eventually puts forth a hypothesis that originally there were Mon-Khmer speakers living in the area of what is today northern Vietnam when at some point in the distant past there was a very large migration of Tai speakers into the region from present-day southwestern China. The resulting “mixing” (*hỗn hợp*) created the unique population which inhabited the area just prior to the advent of Chinese rule.²²

Although today we can find fault with details in Vuong Hoàng Tuyễn’s scholarship, his overall findings were quite impressive for the time. Vuong Hoàng Tuyễn tried to make sense of the confusing linguistic and ethnological ties between the Vietnamese, Tai and other peoples, and he came to conclude that while Vietnamese is an Austroasiatic language, there are significant connections between Vietnamese and Tai. It is also impressive that Vuong Hoàng Tuyễn attempted to find a historical explanation for these connections. That said, with the evidence that the word for “plow” came from Tai, and that Tai place names persist, Vuong Hoàng Tuyễn could have described a process of interaction which was more specific than “mixing.” The evidence he provided and the manner in which he did so could just have easily been used to argue that Tai might have “conquered” certain people before the Chinese came and did the same. However, Vuong Hoàng Tuyễn refrained from making such a specific argument, and it quickly became impossible to make any such claims.

Sibling nationalities

In the 1950s, and into the early 1960s, there was a surprising degree of debate about the past among scholars in the DRV. As the 1960s progressed, however, this started to change, and by the early 1970s, debates about the past were essentially declared settled and closed. The main reason for this change was that the government of the DRV increasingly demanded a history which would fit its vision of the past, and its present need to shore up the nation in a time of war and post-colonial uncertainty. In terms of the history of ethnic relations, the DRV government urged scholars to find a place for the ethnic minority peoples in the national narrative.²³ It was imperative then, as it still is today, that this narrative be a story of unity and peaceful coexistence.

In reading the scholarship from this period, it is clear that the findings of scholars fulfilled the government’s needs. It is not clear, however, if scholars intentionally

²² Ibid., 188 and 193.

²³ Again, consult Pelley for more on this.

did this, and actually believed otherwise, or if they truly believed the government's view of the past and sought to find evidence of it. Vuong Hoàng Tuyên's conclusion that "mixing" had taken place between Tai and Mon-Khmer in the Red River delta in the face of evidence which suggested a more unequal interaction is an example of this. Nonetheless, he at least provided evidence which readers could use to form their own opinions. In the ultra-nationalistic years of the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, even the evidence provided by scholars became problematic. An example of this pertinent to our topic here would be the work of the scholar, Hoàng Thị Châu. In the late 1960s, Hoàng Thị Châu wrote a series of articles about the very words mentioned at the outset of this essay. Whether she intended it or not, her scholarship fit perfectly with the state's needs at that time for evidence that ethnic relations in Vietnam had always been harmonious and familial.

In conducting her research, Hoàng Thị Châu was influenced by, among other works, a publication by the American linguist, Paul K. Benedict. In 1942, Benedict wrote an article entitled "Thai, Kadai, and Indonesian: A New Alignment in Southeastern Asia" in which he argued for a connection between what we would today refer to as Tai and Austronesian languages, like Cham and Malay.²⁴ While Benedict did not directly address the question of how or if Tai and Austronesian languages were related to Austroasiatic languages, such as the Mon-Khmer languages which one finds on the Indochinese Peninsula, he did mention in passing that the alignment of Thai-Kadai-Indonesian probably constituted a part of a larger Austric superstock. This later concept had been developed in 1906 by German linguist Wilhelm Schmidt, who had argued that Mon-Khmer and Austronesian languages were related.²⁵ Hence, according to Benedict, if Tai and Indonesian were related, and since Indonesian was clearly an Austronesian language, then following Schmidt there had to be a link between these languages and Austroasiatic languages.

Influenced by Benedict's argument, Hoàng Thị Châu engaged in her study believing that languages as diverse as Zhuang, Khmer and Cham were all ultimately related, and this idea clearly influenced the manner in which she examined those mysterious terms which we find in the *Complete Book*. One of her articles was devoted to the term *phu đạo*, which in the *Complete Book* literally means "the way of the father," and which appeared in the lines, "From one generation to the next fathers passed [positions] on to their sons. This is called the way of the father [*phu đạo*]." Hoàng Thị Châu argues that *phu đạo* was a term which referred to a ruler. She does this by noting that there are similar sounding terms in "ethnic minority languages" (*tiếng dân tộc thiểu số*) in Vietnam which signified a ruler, such as Cham

²⁴ Paul K. Benedict, "Thai, Kadai and Indonesian: A New Alignment in Southeastern Asia," *American Anthropologist* 44 (1942): 576-601.

²⁵ Wilhelm Schmidt, "Die Mon-Khmer Völker, ein Bindeglied zwischen Völkern Zentralasiens und Austronesiens" [The Mon-Khmer people, a link between the peoples of Central Asia and Austronesia], *Archiv für Anthropologie Neue folge*. Bd. V. Hft 1 und 2 (1906): 59-109.

(*pa tao*), Jarai (*po tao*) Rhade (*mo tao*), Bahnar (*ba dəo*), Mường (*đəo*), as well as Thái and Tày (*təo*).²⁶ She also points out that there are records from the period of the Lê Dynasty (1428-1788) in which it is evident that the title *phu đəo* continued to be used in areas where Thái, Tày and Mường peoples lived. From this she concludes that the current terms for leader in Thái and Tày (*təo*), as well as Mường (*đəo*), all came from *phu đəo*, and that this constitutes an example of a multisyllabic word in “the ancient Việt language” which changed into a monosyllabic word. In addition, Hoàng Thị Châu also notes that the word *phu đəo* points to the “kin relations” (*quan hệ họ hàng*) between Vietnamese and surrounding languages, and that this term enables us to hear “the sound of the spoken language of the past” (*âm thanh của tiếng nói thời xưa*).²⁷

In a subsequent article, Hoàng Thị Châu examined some of the other terms which we find in the *Complete Book*. In particular, she focused on the titles for the Hùng king’s sons (*quan lang*), daughters (*my nương*), and his officials (*bò chính*). In this article, Hoàng Thị Châu attributes these terms to “people’s legends about the establishment of the nation” (*truyền thuyết dựng nước của dân tộc*), thereby implying that they had been passed down for centuries before they were finally recorded. She also follows the same technique that she employed in the previous article and explains what these terms meant by indicating the existence of cognates in what she labels here, in full accordance with the DRV government’s official vision of ethnic relations within Vietnam, as the “languages of the sibling nationalities” (*ngôn ngữ dân tộc anh em*).

For instance, Hoàng Thị Châu notes that the *bò chính* was a person who assisted the Hùng kings, and that among the Jarai, the person who helped their hereditary rulers, *po tao*, was called *pô ta rinh*. She then examines the term *my nương* and states that there are connections between each of the two words in this compound and words in other languages. For example, she argues that *my* corresponds with words which signify a girl or female in such languages as Mường (*mại*), Cham (*ca mái*), Bahnar (*mai*), and Santali (*mai*), an Austroasiatic language spoken in parts of India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan. She also points out that the word in Lao and Thái for woman is *me nhinh*, but does not explain what either of these terms means. She does note, however, that there is a word, *nàng*, in Thái and Tày which refers to a woman of high status, which is what she suggests the *nương* in *my nương* means. Finally, she argues that there is a Malay and Indonesian term for “lady,” *đang*, and that this is the same term as *nương/nàng*, claiming that it is easy for an “n” to change to a “d” and vice versa.²⁸

Hoàng Thị Châu then moves on to examine the term *quan lang*. She states

²⁶ Hoàng Thị Châu, “Tìm hiểu,” 25.

²⁷ Ibid., 27-28.

²⁸ The term in Malay and Indonesian is actually *dayang*, an old term for a virtuous woman. Hoàng Thị Châu, “Vai net,” 145.

that many writers have argued that the term *quan* comes from the Chinese word for an official, *guan*. However, Hoàng Thị Châu rejects this explanation, arguing that the term was used by the Hùng kings, that is, prior to the period of Chinese contact. What is more, she maintains that the term *quan lang* must be a parallel construction with *my nuong*, and just as both of the words in the latter term signified a female, *quan* must signify a male, although she does not provide any evidence for such a term in any language. In the case of *lang*, however, Hoàng Thị Châu argues that this is a term of respect for a man in Mường, Tày and Thái, and that it is the same word as that for man or person in such languages as Bahnar (*dranglo*), Rhade (*arang*), Cham (*arang*) and Malay and Indonesian (*orang*).²⁹

At the end of this article, Hoàng Thị Châu notes that the above titles are not close to words used today by Vietnamese. She argues that this is because the inhabitants of the society of Văn Lang are no longer uniform (*thuần nhất*). Over time they divided into different social classes (*tầng lớp xã hội*), to the point that they needed their own terms for each class.³⁰ Hence, what Hoàng Thị Châu appears to have believed is that these terms truly represented the sound of “the” spoken language of the past, and that this language was spoken by almost all of the peoples who today inhabit the modern nation-state of Vietnam. This view was echoed in the work of Trần Quốc Vượng around this time, who argued that the term *hùng* in the title, Hùng kings, is an ancient Việt word which is close to the words for a leader in Tai (*khun*) and Mundari (*khunzt*), an Austroasiatic language.³¹

The Tai confederation of Nam Cương

While scholars like Hoàng Thị Châu and Trần Quốc Vượng were drawing connections between Vietnamese and various other languages, other scholars were developing a historical explanation for a particularly close relationship between Vietnamese and Tai speakers. This explanation was based on the activities of a mysterious historical figure by the name of King An Dương (An Dương Vương). According to the *Complete Book*, the Hùng kings ruled for generations over their kingdom of Văn Lang until in 257 B.C.E an individual attacked and overthrew the final Hùng king and declared himself King An Dương.

King An Dương appears to have been an actual historical figure. The main source of information about him comes from the *Record of the Outer Territory of Jiao Region* (*Jiaozhou waiyu ji*), a Chinese work from either the late 3rd or early 4th century C.E. This work is no longer extant, but passages from it are preserved in a 6th century text, Li Daoyuan’s *Annotated Classic of Waterways* (*Shuijing zhu*). There it is recorded that at some point in the past there were rulers in the area of what is today

²⁹ Ibid., 146-146.

³⁰ Ibid., 147.

³¹ Trần Quốc Vượng, 354-355.

the Red River Delta who were called “Lạc” not “Hùng” kings, a topic we will turn to later in this paper, and that they were later defeated by King An Dương. To quote,

The *Record of the Outer Territory of Jiao Region* states that “In the past, before Jiaozhi [Việt, Giao Chi] had commanderies and districts, the land had *lac* fields. These fields followed the rising and falling of the floodwaters, and therefore the people who opened these fields for cultivation were called Lạc people. Lạc kings/princes and Lạc marquises were appointed to control the various commanderies and districts. Many of the districts had Lạc generals. The Lạc generals had bronze seals on green ribbons. Later the son of the Thục/Shu king led 30,000 troops to attack the Lạc king. The Lạc marquises brought the Lạc generals under submission. The son of the Thục/Shu king thereupon was called King An Dương. Later, King of Southern Yue [Nam Việt/Nanyue] Commissioner Tuo [i.e., Zhao Tuo] raised troops and attacked King An Dương.”³²

In this passage, King An Dương is said to have been the son of the Thục/Shu (蜀) king. Thục, or Shu in Chinese, is the name of an ancient kingdom which once existed in the area of what is today Sichuan Province. Shu was conquered by the kingdom of Qin in 316 B.C.E., roughly a century before the Qin Dynasty conquered the area of what is now northern Vietnam, and also long before the year of 257 B.C.E. when the *Complete Book* claimed that King An Dương defeated the last Hùng king. In Vietnamese sources we can also find King An Dương referred to sometimes as the prince of Shu, sometimes as the king of Shu, and sometimes Shu appears as a surname. As such, there is a great deal of historical confusion surrounding this figure, and various scholars over the years have sought to clarify who he was. Some Vietnamese scholars in the 19th century, for instance, argued that he could not have been from Shu because there were other kingdoms in between.³³ In the 1950s, however, historians Trần Văn Giáp and Đào Duy Anh argued that he was from Shu.³⁴ Then in the early 1960s a new “document” about this figure emerged.

In 1963, the North Vietnamese journal, *Historical Research*, published a translation by Lã Văn Lô of a story from the Tày, a Tai-speaking people in Cao Bằng

³² Li Daoyuan 麗道元, comp., *Shuijing zhu* 水經注 [Annotated Classic of Waterways], (ca. 515-524 C.E.), 37/7a-b. There is one term in this passage, 王 *vương/wang*, which can be translated as either “king” or “prince.”

³³ *Khâm định Việt sử thông giám cương mục* 欽定越史通鑑綱目 [Imperially Commissioned Outline and Digest of the Comprehensive Mirror of Việt History], (1881), A. 2674, Tiền biên 2/6b. Hereafter, KĐVSTGCM.

³⁴ Trần Văn Giáp, “Một vài ý kiến về ‘An Dương Ngọc Giản’ và vấn đề Thục An Dương Vương” [Some opinions concerning the “An Dương Jade Tablet” and King An Dương of Thục], *Văn sử* 28 (1957): 57 and Đào Duy Anh, *Lịch sử cổ đại Việt Nam* [History of Vietnamese antiquity], (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Hóa Thông Tin, 2005, orig. pub., 1957), 375.

Province, called “Nine Lords Compete to Become King” (Cầu chúa chenh vùa). This story related information about King An Duong, and claimed that he was from the area of Cao Bằng and Guangxi, and that in the 3rd century B.C.E. he controlled a confederation of ten mường called “Nam Cuong.”³⁵ The publication of this translation created a great deal of interest, and in 1969 the Institute of Archaeology sent a delegation to Cao Bằng to investigate where this story came from and to see if they could identify any archaeological remains which corresponded with this tale. Their search for archaeological evidence proved unsuccessful, but their investigation into the origins of the “Nine Lords Compete to Become King” tale produced a story of its own.

The delegation from the Institute of Archaeology found that this story had originally been written down by a certain Lê Đinh Sự, who also went by the names Lê Sơn and Lê Bỉnh Sự. Lê Đinh Sự was Tày and had initially worked as a teacher. He had asthma which became so severe at one point that he had to spend time at home convalescing. It was at this point that he “collected” (*sưu tầm*) various Tày stories and wrote them down in prose. Later, someone created a Tày verse version of this story. This is ostensibly what Lã Văn Lô had then translated into Vietnamese, however the delegation could not determine this for sure as the person who owned the copy which Lã Văn Lô supposedly translated had died.³⁶

As such, the authorship of this text was so convoluted as to seriously compromise its validity as a document for historical research. Further, without a Tày original to examine, scholars had to rely on Lã Văn Lô’s Vietnamese translation, which from the title alone already looked suspicious. The title in Tày, according to Lã Văn Lô, was “Cầu chúa chenh vùa,” which was almost identical to the translated title in Vietnamese of “Chín chúa tranh vua.” “Cầu” is the word for “nine” in many Tai languages, however the rest was simply Vietnamese words written with different tones or a slightly different spelling. Yet despite all of these issues, the delegation from the Institute of Archaeology still concluded that the story was at its core authentic, and that there were probably some Tày who shared origins with King An Duong.³⁷

With a connection between the Tày and King An Duong thus “established” by means of the “Nine Lords Compete to Become King” tale, later historians used the figure of King An Duong to provide a historical explanation for the close ties between

³⁵ Lã Văn Lô, intro. and trans., “Quanh vấn đề An Duong Vương Thực Phán, hay là truyền thuyết ‘Cầu chúa chenh vùa’ của đồng bào Tày” [Concerning the Problem of King An Duong, Thực Phán, or the story “Nine Lords Compete to Become king” of the Tày Compatriots], *Nghiên cứu lịch sử* 50 (1963): 48-57.

³⁶ Phạm Như Hò and Đỗ Đinh Truật, “Vài ý kiến quanh truyền thuyết ‘Cầu chúa chenh vùa’” [Some Opinions Concerning the Story “Nine lords Compete to Become king”], in *Hùng Vương Dụng Nước* [The Hung Kings Establish the Nation], Vol. 3 (Hà Nội: Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1973): 395-396.

³⁷ Ibid., 400-401.

Vietnamese and Tai. The earliest sources for information about King An Dương are Chinese, and the information they contain is very brief, merely mentioning that he came to power.³⁸ The early Chinese sources where this information appears, such as Sima Qian's *Historical Records* and Li Dao yuan's *Annotated Classic of Waterways*, also contain many names for people who inhabited the area of what is today southern China and northern Vietnam. For instance, they mention such names as Đông Việt/ Dongyue (東越), Lạc Việt/Luoyue (駱越), Âu Việt/Ouyue (甌越), Tây Âu/Xi'ou (西甌), Âu Lạc/Ouluo (甌駱), and Tây Âu Lạc/Xi Ouluo (西甌駱). In their passages on King An Dương, however, these sources merely mentioned that the people he defeated before coming to power were called the Lạc.

Centuries after this information was recorded in Chinese texts, the Vietnamese *Complete Book* provided more details about King An Dương. It notes that after he conquered the last Hùng king, he established a kingdom called Âu Hạc.³⁹ This term, Âu Hạc/Ouhao (甌貉), does not appear in any Chinese sources. Indeed, Chinese sources do not provide a name for King An Dương's kingdom. Vietnamese today transliterate this name as Âu Lạc rather than Âu Hạc, and argue that the Vietnamese wrote the character, *lạc*, differently. However, it is still only in Ngô Sĩ Liên's 15th century *Complete Book* that this name first appeared. Therefore, there is a great deal of confusion surrounding this supposed name of King An Dương's kingdom, as it only appears in a Vietnamese source over 1,500 years after it had supposedly existed, and contains a character which does not accord with any previous historical information.⁴⁰

Despite all of these questions concerning the supposed name of King An Dương's kingdom, Vietnamese historians in the second half of the 20th century put aside all of these issues and interpreted this name, Âu Hạc/Lạc, as signifying that King An Dương had created a kingdom which unified two peoples, the Lạc Việt and the Âu Việt or Tây Âu. Further, the Lạc Việt were identified as the main ancestors of the Vietnamese, whereas the Âu Việt were loosely associated with the Tày ethnic

³⁸ In addition to the passage from the *Record of the Outer Territory of Jiao Region*, there is an 8th century commentary to Sima Qian's *Historical Records* which cites a work called the *Record of Guang Region* (*Guangzhou ji*) for the same information. See also, Sima Qian 司馬遷, *Shiji* [Historical Records], (Siku quanshu ed., orig. comp., first cent. B.C.E.), 113/3b.

³⁹ Ngô Sĩ Liên, *Ngoại ký* 1/6a.

⁴⁰ The above-mentioned 8th century commentary to Sima Qian's *Historical Records* does state that after Zhao Tuo defeated King An Dương, he ordered two commissioners to take control of the two commanderies of Jiaozhi and Jiuzhen. These terms were being used anachronistically as they were created later by the Han Dynasty. In any case, they refer to an area equivalent to what is today the Red River Delta and north-central Vietnam. This commentary then indicates that this area was the same as Âu Lạc/Oulue, however it does not indicate that this was the name of King An Dương's kingdom. Further, the point of this commentary was to argue that terms such as Lạc/Luo, Tây Âu Lạc/Xi Oulue and Âu Lạc/Oulue refer to the same people and places. This was a different perspective from what we will see in the next paragraph that modern Vietnamese scholars have argued. See Sima Qian, 113/3b.

group, a group who today inhabit the Sino-Vietnamese border region and are closely related to the Zhuang.⁴¹ This practice of assigning actual ethnic groups to ancient names is of course an extremely problematic endeavor.⁴² Perhaps nothing reveals this better than the fact that today the Zhuang in China also argue that they are descended from the ancient Lạc Việt, or Luoyue in Chinese.⁴³ Obviously the Zhuang and the Vietnamese cannot both be right. Nonetheless, as far-fetched as this willful imagining of the past may be, this interpretation of Âu Hạc/Lạc began to appear in texts about Vietnamese history by the 1980s, and it influenced the way in which scholars viewed the past.

The wet rice socio-cultural model

A perfect example of this is the work of linguist Phạm Đức Dương. In 1982, Phạm Đức Dương wrote a very important article on the role of Tai speakers in early Vietnamese history called “The Origin of the Wet Rice Socio-Cultural Model of the Việt People from Linguistic Evidence.” In this article, Phạm Đức Dương discovers that there is a shared “structure” (*cơ cấu*) of vocabulary between what he calls Tày Thái and Việt Mường pertaining to wet rice agriculture and the cultural, social, economic and political practices associated with the cultivation of wet rice. In particular, he notes that many words in Vietnamese dealing with wet rice agriculture all come from Tày Thái. For instance, both share a common word for rice = *gạo/ khǎu* [BT, *khǎu*], and they also make the same distinction between two main types of rice: glutinous rice, *gạo nếp* = *khǎu dép* (Tày)/*khǎu niêu* (Thái) [BT, *khǎu ón*], and regular white rice, *gạo tẻ* = *khǎu te* (Tày)/*khǎu xέ* (Thái) [BT, *khǎo sé*].⁴⁴

In order to grow wet rice, one needs to be able to control the necessary water. Phạm Đức Dương finds that Việt Mường words pertaining to this topic, such as *muong phai* (“irrigation canal”) [BT, *muong* = irrigation ditch, *phai* = dam] and *guồng* (“waterwheel”) [BT, *cuồng*], come from Tày Thái. Based on this information, he argues that the Việt Mường must have learned about wet rice agriculture and water control from the Tày Thái. He also points out that the Tày Thái created political entities (*baan* and *muang*) which were centered around the control of water in a

⁴¹ Phan Huy Lê, et al., *Lịch sử Việt Nam* [History of Vietnam], Tập I (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Đại Học và Trung Học Chuyên Nghiệp, 1985), 127-129.

⁴² For an insightful discussion of the problem viewing ethnicity through ancient Chinese names, see Erica Brindley, “Barbarians or Not? Ethnicity and Changing Conceptions of the Ancient Yue (Viet) Peoples, ca. 400-50 BC,” *Asia Major* 16.1 (2003): 1-32.

⁴³ Anthony V. N. Diller, Jerold A. Edmondson and Yongxian Luo, eds., *The Tai-Kadai Languages* (London: Routledge, 2008), 319.

⁴⁴ Phạm Đức Dương, “Cội nguồn mô hình văn hóa – xã hội lúa nước của người Việt qua cứ liệu ngôn ngữ” [The Origin of the Wet Rice Socio-cultural Model of the Việt people from Linguistic Evidence], *Nghiên cứu lịch sử* 206 (1982): 43. I am placing Black Tai equivalents here for reference, as Black Tai is one of the main Tai languages in Vietnam.

given area, and argues that the Việt Mường likely learned this way of establishing political control over an area from the Tày Thái as well, although there is no shared vocabulary to support this claim.⁴⁵

While Phạm Đức Dương provides solid evidence of shared vocabulary between the Tày Thái and Việt Mường concerning wet rice agriculture, his efforts to explain the nature of the interactions between these two peoples in the past is much more problematic. At times he states that the Việt Mường learned about wet rice agriculture and Tày Thái socio-political structures in the foothills, and then they moved out into the Red River delta where they subsequently developed in ways which made them distinct from the Tày Thái. For example, with the case of rice, Phạm Đức Dương argues that the Việt Mường made a transition in the past from eating sticky rice to eating white rice. Without providing any sense of when or why this happened, he states that as the population of the Việt Mường grew, they moved from the foothills into the delta region and switched to growing white rice which produces a higher yield as it can be harvested two times a year. Nonetheless, the fact that sticky rice is still used in some rituals, he argues, suggests that at one time in the distant past, sticky rice was the main form of rice which the predecessors of the Vietnamese, the Việt Mường, ate.⁴⁶

Phạm Đức Dương argues for a similar transition in the kinds of fields which were cultivated in the past. He notes that there are two main kinds of fields in growing rice. Tày Thái refer to fields for growing wet rice as “na” [BT, *ná*] and mountain fields for growing dry rice as “hay” [BT, *hay*]. Some Mường, meanwhile, make the distinction between growing wet rice in “na,” like Tày Thái, and “ruộng” for dry rice. Phạm Đức Dương then notes that the Tày Thái and the Mường both view the cultivation of wet rice fields as superior to that of mountain fields, and see people who do so as more civilized. Nonetheless, many Tày Thái and Mường, particularly those who live at lower elevations, make use of both of these types of fields, and find mountain fields to be indispensable to their livelihood.

This structure, Phạm Đức Dương then adds, is replicated by the Vietnamese in delta areas who combine wet rice fields, or “ruộng,” with gardens, or “vườn,” a term which comes from Chinese and which Phạm Đức Dương argues was employed to differentiate these plots of land from mountain fields. Further, Phạm Đức Dương notes that while Vietnamese do not see an opposition between “ruộng” and “vườn,” they do view those who cultivate wet rice as superior to people who live in the mountains and cultivate rice there in terraced fields. Phạm Đức Dương’s point then is that the Vietnamese maintained a “dual-field” concept, but changed it, ostensibly as they developed separately from the Tày Thái after having moved into the Red River delta.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Ibid., 44 and 48.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 44.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 44 and 51.

At the same time that Phạm Đức Dương makes these arguments about Việt Mường learning from the Tày Thái in the foothills about wet rice cultivation and then moving into the delta, he also talks about the Tày Thái and Việt Mường living together in the Red River delta in a context in which the Tày Thái possessed more sophisticated knowledge than the Việt Mường. Phạm Đức Dương notes the importance of dykes for the Việt Mường in their effort to control the Red River, and argues that the building of dykes grew out of the practice of constructing either irrigation canals or citadels, both of which he says were introduced by Tày Thái. Further, as examples of early citadels in the region, he mentions Cố Loa, right in the heart of the Red River Delta, and Xám Mùn, in the area of what is today Điện Biên Phủ, both of which he says were initially constructed by Tày Thái.⁴⁸ In making this argument, however, Phạm Đức Dương does not explain why the word for “citadel” in Việt Mường (*thành*) and Tày Thái (*chiêng*) comes from Chinese (*cheng*).⁴⁹

In addition to seeing the Tày Thái as leading the way in constructing citadels in the Red River Delta, Phạm Đức Dương also argues that the Tày Thái were the first to establish political structures in the region as well. He states that while the Việt Mường and Tày Thái were living together in the delta, they had to work to manage water and to protect themselves from threats from the north. Several Tai polities, or *muang*, probably emerged in the process, but eventually one was credited with being the most powerful and important. Members of the ruling family in this *muang* were sent out to rule over other *muang* and with this you had the emergence in the delta of the *baan muang* system, that is, what scholars recognize as a distinctly Tai political structure.

Phạm Đức Dương adds that the head of this new super *muang* was called *phò khun* in Tai. Here he agrees with Trần Quốc Vượng that the term, “*hung*,” in the title “*Hùng king*” comes from this Tai term. Below the *phò khun*, Phạm Đức Dương argues, were leaders of subsidiary *muang* called *phụ đạo*, a term which Phạm Đức Dương follows scholars like Hoàng Thị Châu in stating that it is preserved in the Thái and Mường words for a ruler, “*tạo*” and “*đạo*,” respectively. Finally, he says that there were *pò chiêng* who were in charge of the main *muang*’s administrative center, where the *phò khun* lived, and where the main citadel, or “*chiêng*,” was located. This entire *baan muang* system, Phạm Đức Dương also notes, is precisely what Chinese “described” (*miêu tả*) when they first encountered the region.⁵⁰

Phạm Đức Dương’s interpretation of the past is fraught with misunderstandings and contradictions. He has the Việt Mường learning about wet rice agriculture from the Tày Thái in the foothills and then taking this knowledge into the Red River delta at the same time that he has the Tày Thái in the delta building citadels. Then

⁴⁸ Ibid., 45.

⁴⁹ Cheah Yanchong, “The Ancient Culture of the Tai People: The Impact of the Hua Xia Culture on it and its Implications,” *Journal of the Siam Society* 76 (1988): 232-233.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 49.

he employs terms which we only find in the 15th century *Complete Book* to indicate the world which he says the Chinese “described” centuries earlier. Finally, he also says that these terms in the *Complete Book* are definitely Tai, but that these works describe “a political structure in the style of the ancient Tày Thái society which the Việt Mường were already using” (*tổ chức chính trị kiểu xã hội Tày Thái cổ mà người Việt Mường đã áp dụng*).

Distancing the Tai in the 15th century

This conceptual chaos which we find in Phạm Đức Dương’s article is due in part to the fact that Vietnamese scholars have never clearly determined which historical sources are acceptable for examining early Vietnamese history and which are not. King An Dương’s supposed kingdom of Âu Lạc is a case in point. Its first appearance as Âu Hạc in a Vietnamese text over 1,500 years after King An Dương reportedly lived is a very strong sign that this name was a medieval invention. In fact, almost all of the recorded information about Vietnamese antiquity is a medieval invention, for it was during that period that some Vietnamese scholars attempted to create a more hallowed history for themselves. In this process, Tai-speaking peoples played an important role. To understand this, we need to gain a sense of the actual historical contact which Vietnamese had with Tai-speaking peoples, as well as how it is that some Vietnamese invented an antiquity for themselves.

While there is some linguistic evidence to suggest that some contact between speakers of Tai and Mon-Khmer languages may have occurred very early, it is when Tai peoples started to migrate out of the Guangxi region that historical evidence of Tai-Vietnamese contact becomes apparent.⁵¹ While this is a process which is difficult to document, we can find traces of the movement of Tai peoples in Chinese historical records. With the conflicts that occurred in the 860s related to the kingdom of Nanzhao’s expansion, for instance, we can find references to Tai soldiers arriving in the Red River delta. The *Book of the Savages* mentions a group of “Mang Savages” (茫蠻) who called their rulers “*zhao mang*” (詔茫, i.e., *cao muang* in Tai word order). It records further that in 863 a regiment of two to three thousand of these Mang Savage men congregated on the bank of the Tô Lịch River which flows by Hanoi.⁵² What became of these men is not recorded, but we can assume that they likely represent a larger movement of peoples at that time.

Better documented is the conflict between the Vietnamese Lý Dynasty and

⁵¹ According to linguist Michel Ferlus, the basic term for rice in Tai languages, “*khaw*,” originates from a Mon-Khmer root meaning “husked rice.” See Michel Ferlus, “The Austroasiatic Vocabulary for Rice: Its Origin and Expansion” (paper presented at The Twentieth Anniversary Meeting of the Southeast Asian Linguistics Society, Zurich, Switzerland, June 10-11, 2010).

⁵² Fan Chuo 樊綽, *Manshu* 蠻書 [Book of the Savages], (Siku quanshu ed., orig. comp., 9th century), 4/10b-11a.

Nong Zhigao (Nùng Trí Cao), a Tai ruler who established a kingdom in the 11th century in the area of what is today the Guangxi-Vietnam border.⁵³ The Vietnamese wished to make Nong Zhigao a vassal, but he rebelled and declared the establishment of a “Kingdom of the Southern Heaven” (Nantian guo). The conflict which ensued clearly led to contact between Vietnamese and Tai, however this incident also points to what must have been shared elements among the Tai and Vietnamese elite in this period. In particular, it is obvious that both participated in a world of Sinitic political signs and meanings. Whereas the Red River Delta had long been exposed to Chinese ideas of rulership, during the course of the Tang and Song Dynasties some of the Tai peoples in the area of what is today Guangxi Province also experienced a few centuries in which they were gradually incorporated into the Chinese realm. Chinese granted Tai leaders official titles and even established some schools and trained some Tai to take the civil service exams.⁵⁴ In the 11th century when Nong Zhigao rebelled, this process was far from complete, but it points to the fact that there was likely at least a shared political vocabulary and culture among the elite from diverse ethnic groups in this region. That Vietnamese rulers were willing to offer their daughters to local Tai rulers in marriage, as one did in 1029 C.E., to ensure that they maintained peace along the northern border, is further evidence of this.⁵⁵

In addition to this contact with Tai, who were in some ways their cultural and political counterparts, the Vietnamese also encountered Tai peoples who they clearly viewed as their inferiors. Referred to at times as “Lao Tú” (獮子), the account below is representative of how these peoples were characterized.⁵⁶

Lao Tú is another name for savages. There are many in Huguang and Yunnan. Some serve Giao Chi.⁵⁷ There are also some who tattoo their foreheads and bore their teeth. There are quite a few different types of them. It was recorded in the past that there are Head-Shaped Lao Tú, Red-Pants Lao Tú and Nose-

⁵³ For more on this rebellion, see James Anderson, *The Rebel Den of Nùng Trí Cao: Loyalty and Identity Along the Sino-Vietnamese Frontier* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007).

⁵⁴ References concerning the political incorporation of Tai and other aboriginal peoples in the Guangxi area during the Tang and Song can be found in Fan Chengda, *Treatises of the Supervisor and Guardian of the Cinnamon Sea*, trans., James M. Hargett (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010), 148-232. For evidence about the reach of the civil service examination to this same area, see Araki Toshikazu, “Nung Chih-kao and the K’o-chü Examinations,” *Acta Asiatica* 50 (1986): 73-94.

⁵⁵ *Việt sử lược* 越史略 [Summary of Việt history], (Siku quanshu ed., orig. comp., fourteenth cent.), 2/7b.

⁵⁶ This first character can be pronounced Liêu in Vietnamese and Liao in Chinese. However, when referring to these peoples who inhabited an area from southwestern China into the Vietnam-Laos border regions, this character is usually pronounced Lao/Lao.

⁵⁷ “Huguang” refers to the area of what is today Hunan and Guangxi Provinces. “Giao Chi” (Chn., Jiaozhi) is an old name for the Red River delta region. It is not clear how the Lao Tú “served” (服役, *phục dịch*) Giao Chi as this term can refer to labor or military service.

Drinking Lao Tú.⁵⁸ They all live in cliff caverns or nest huts. They drink wine through reeds. They are fond of warring with enemies and they beat bronze drums. They value big ones. When a drum is first completed, they place it in a courtyard with wine and invite their fellow kind. Those who come fill [the courtyard] to the gates. The daughter of the notable takes a gold or silver hairpin and strikes the drum, after which she leaves it with the owner.⁵⁹

While this 14th century account did not state where the Lao Tú lived, a 15th century Chinese work, the *Treatise on Annan*, indicated that the Lao Tú lived to the west of the Red River Delta in the mountainous region which stretches towards what is today the Lao border.⁶⁰ Hence, the Vietnamese had Tai peoples to their north and west, and in the 15th century their relationship with some of these peoples, particularly those in the northwest, changed. Historian Li Tana has documented how after the Ming occupation (1406-1427) the Vietnamese expanded their control towards the northwest into Tai controlled areas. She argues that this process of expansion was not only military but also cultural in that the Vietnamese came to clearly differentiate themselves from their Tai neighbors and to view themselves as superior.⁶¹ While such a self-perception likely existed to some extent in earlier times, as is evidenced by the Lý Dynasty's desire that Nong Zhigao serve as a vassal, the historical evidence from the 15th century demonstrates a hardening of this position.⁶²

Inventing ancient Vietnamese kings

This hardening of a sense of superiority occurred at the same time that members of the Vietnamese elite were inventing an antiquity for their land, one in which the Red River Delta had supposedly been ruled over by generations of rulers called Hùng kings. While it is possible that this invention of antiquity began earlier, it seems to have come to maturation in the 15th century in a collection of stories about the Red River delta region called the *Arrayed Tales of Selected Oddities from South of the Passes* (hereafter, “*Arrayed Tales*”). The opening story in that collection,

⁵⁸ The name “Head-Shaped Lao Tú” (頭形獮子, Đầu Hình Lao Tú) is likely a mistake for the name “Flying-Head Lao Tú” (飛頭獮子, Phi Đầu Lao Tú). See Fan Chengda, 180.

⁵⁹ Lê Tắc, 1/20a.

⁶⁰ The actual title of what I am calling the *Annan zhi* 安南志 [Treatise on Annan] as it is preserved today is *Annan zhizhuan* 安南志原, but this title does not make sense, and the added character is likely a mistake. For the reference to the Lao Tú in this work, see Léonard Aurousseau, ed., *Ngan-nam tche yuan* [Annan zhizhuan] (Hanoi: École Française d’Extrême-Orient, 1923), 212-14.

⁶¹ Li Tana, “The Ming Factor and the Emergence of the Việt in the 15th Century,” in *Southeast Asia in the Fifteenth Century: The China Factor*, eds., Geoff Wade and Sun Laichen (Singapore: NUS Press, 2010), 84-93.

⁶² See, for instance, the documents and inscriptions cited in E. Gaspardone, “Annamites et Thai au XVe Siècle,” *Journal Asiatique* 231 (1939): 405-436.

“The Tale of the Hùng Bàng Clan,” consists of a detailed genealogy which traces a line of descent from the mythical ancient Chinese ruler Shen Nong to the Hùng kings.⁶³ Scholars have long doubted the veracity of this genealogy, and indeed a close textual investigation demonstrates clearly that it is a fabrication.⁶⁴ However, not only was a genealogy of descent to the Hùng kings a medieval invention, but the Hùng kings themselves were as well. Further, their invention is connected to the Tai. To understand this requires that we proceed through a somewhat detailed examination of various texts.

The earliest record which mentions rulers in the Red River delta is the *Record of the Outer Territory of Jiao Region*, which contains the passage noted above about Lạc people working *lạc* fields and ruled over by Lạc kings, Lạc marquises and Lạc generals before they were defeated by King An Dương. This passage was cited in several later Chinese works and was slightly altered with each new appearance. One transformation which eventually took place is that the term “*lạc*” was replaced by the term “*hùng*” which closely resembles it, to make “*hùng* fields,” “Hùng kings,” “Hùng marquises” and “Hùng generals.” The “The Tale of the Hùng Bàng Clan” in the *Arrayed Tales*, however, did something novel. It combined both of these terms and referred to the kings as “Hùng kings” but stated that they were assisted by “Lạc marquises” and “Lạc generals.”⁶⁵

Ngô Sĩ Liên’s late 15th century *Complete Book of the Historical Records of Đại Việt*, like the “Tale of the Hùng Bàng Clan” in the *Arrayed Tales*, also referred to “Hùng kings,” “Lạc marquises” and “Lạc generals.” Further, Ngô Sĩ Liên’s *Complete Book* included additional information about a Hùng king and events which took place around a mountain on the western edge of the Red River Delta known as Mount Tân Viên. According to the *Complete Book*, in the final years of the period of the Hùng kings, the Hùng king at that time had a beautiful daughter named My Nuong. The Thục/Shu king heard about her and visited to request her hand in marriage. The Hùng king was persuaded by the Lạc marquises to not consent, as they felt that this was a ploy on the part of the Thục/Shu king to take control of the kingdom. The tale then goes on to discuss how a mountain sprite (山精, *son tinh*) and water sprite (水精, *thủy tinh*) subsequently came and competed for My Nuong. In the end, the mountain sprite won and took My Nuong to live on Mount Tân Viên. Angered, the water sprite then attacked the mountain sprite thereby initiating a perennial feud which took place at the beginning of the rainy season. The story then concludes with

⁶³ Vũ Quỳnh 武瓊, comp., *Lĩnh Nam chích quái liệt truyện* 嶺南摭怪列傳 [Arrayed Tales of Selected Oddities from South of the Passes], (n.d., orig. comp., 1492), A. 1200, 1/12a-16b. Although this work contains a preface by Vũ Quỳnh which dates from 1492, most scholars believe that the work was compiled by multiple authors over an extended period of time.

⁶⁴ Liam C. Kelley, “The Biography of the Hùng Bàng Clan as a Medieval Vietnamese Invented Tradition,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 7.2 (2012): 87-130.

⁶⁵ Vũ Quỳnh, 1/8a.

the Thục/Shu king ordering his grandson to attack and annex the kingdom.⁶⁶ His grandson, it turns out, is the figure mentioned in the *Record of the Outer Territory of Jiao Region*, King An Dương.

This story in the *Complete Book* is an elaboration of an account about the spirit of Mount Tân Viên which was recorded first in a 14th century anthology of biographies of powerful spirits, the *Collected Records of the Departed Spirits from the Việt Realm* (hereafter, “Departed Spirits”), and then later in the *Arrayed Tales* as well. These two accounts, however, largely leave out the historical information about this event taking place at the end of the period of the Hùng kings. They simply mention that the Thục/Shu king requested My Nuong’s hand in marriage, but do not conclude the story with King An Dương’s conquest.⁶⁷

This information about the Hùng kings which we find in the *Complete Book* therefore contains a variety of elements. There is some historical information, namely the reference to King An Dương. There is also historical information which has been altered to some degree. For instance, the combined use of “hùng” in “Hùng kings” with “lạc” in “Lạc marquises” and “Lạc generals” does not fit the usage of earlier texts which used either of these two terms uniformly. Further, mention of King An Dương’s grandfather is also a novel addition. Finally, there is some information which comes from the realm of myth or popular legend in the story of the mountain and water sprites. The reason for this combination of different types of information that we find in the *Complete Book* is because the tradition of the Hùng kings is an invention, and it was created by Vietnamese scholars, who developed and then combined two originally unrelated sources of information. One source of information was the passage from the *Record of the Outer Territory of Jiao Region* about early rulers in the Red River delta, and the other was a local tradition most likely created first by Tai peoples around Mount Tân Viên. Let us examine first how the passage from the *Record of the Outer Territory of Jiao Region* was used to create a tradition of Hùng kings.

Up until the beginning of the 15th century, the passage from the *Record of the Outer Territory of Jiao Region* about Lạc kings, King An Dương and Zhao Tuo was associated with particular places in the Vietnamese world. In particular, in a section on ancient remains (*cố tích*), the *Brief Record of An Nam*, a text compiled in the 14th century by a Vietnamese who had switched sides during the second Mongol invasion and lived the rest of his life in China, has an entry on a place called “Việt King Citadel” (Việt Vương Thành) which contains that information. This entry does not directly state who built or inhabited this citadel. Instead, it simply appends the passage from the *Record of the Outer Territory of Jiao Region*, implying that this could have been a citadel built by King An Dương or perhaps Zhao Tuo. That said,

⁶⁶ Ngô Sĩ Liên, *Bản Kỷ* 1/4a-5a.

⁶⁷ Lý Té Xuyên 李濟川, comp., *Việt Điện u linh tập* 粵甸幽靈集錄 [Collected Records of the Departed Spirits of the Việt Realm], (14th century), A. 47, 16b and Vũ Quỳnh, 2/22b.

it does indicate that this citadel was also called Khả Lũ Citadel by common people. Khả Lũ Citadel was another name for Cố Loa, a citadel not far to the north of present-day Hanoi, which was reportedly built by King An Dương.⁶⁸

The 15th century *Treatise on Annan* also contains an entry for Việt King Citadel in a section on ancient remains. It explains that because the citadel was in Việt territory, it came to be known as “Việt King Citadel.” However, the *Treatise on Annan* does not associate this site with the information about the Lạc kings and King An Dương from the *Record of the Outer Territory of Jiao Region*. Instead, it connects that information to a separate site of ancient remains known as “Lạc King Palace” (Lạc Vương Cung).⁶⁹ The remains of this palace were in Tam Đái Subprefecture, which Vietnamese historians in the 19th century identified as the equivalent of what was then Vĩnh Tường Prefecture in Sơn Tây Province, not far from Mount Tân Viên.⁷⁰ In one of the districts of that prefecture, Bạch Hạc District, there was a mound of earth which people referred to as “King An Dương’s Citadel” (An Dương Vương Thành).⁷¹

While this information is somewhat confusing, what we can ascertain is that there were ancient remains in the Red River Delta which that passage from the *Record of the Outer Territory of Jiao Region* was used to explain. Cố Loa appears to have been explained in these terms, as was a mound of earth in Sơn Tây Province. Perhaps it was the case that originally the passage from the *Record of the Outer Territory of Jiao Region* was used to explain the ancient remains that people saw at Cố Loa. This is what we find in the 14th century *Brief Record of An Nam*. Then perhaps by the early 15th century, when the materials which the *Treatise on Annan* was based on were collected, this information had become associated with a different site.

What is interesting about the account in the *Treatise on Annan* is that in addition to repeating the information from the *Record of the Outer Territory of Jiao Region*, it also states that the kingdom which the Lạc kings ruled over was called Văn Lang, that there were 18 successive generations of kings, that their customs were pure and simple, and that they recorded information by tying knots.⁷² Some of this information would eventually become associated with the Hùng kings, when that tradition was created. For instance, the name Văn Lang eventually appeared in the accounts of the Hùng kings in the *Arrayed Tales* and the *Complete Book*. Mention of eighteen generations of kings, however, does not appear in either of those texts, but it did

⁶⁸ Lê Tắc, *An Nam chí lược* [Brief Record of An Nam], (Siku quanshu ed., orig. comp., 1333), 1/10a-b.

⁶⁹ Rousseau, 136.

⁷⁰ Phan Thanh Giản et al., *Tiền biên* 5/29b.

⁷¹ See *Sơn Tây tỉnh chí* 山西省誌 [Gazetteer of Sơn Tây province], (n.d.), A. 857, 32, *Sơn Tây chí* 山西誌 [Gazetteer of Sơn Tây], (n.d.), 57b, and Quốc Sứ Quán Triều Nguyễn, *Đại Nam nhất thống chí* [Unified Gazetteer of Đại Nam], Tập 4, trans., Phạm Trọng Diêm (Huế: Nhà Xuất Bản Thuận Hóa, 1992), 224.

⁷² Rousseau, 136.

ultimately become part of the tradition surrounding the Hùng kings.⁷³ Therefore, what this passage represents is a sign of the tradition as it was being created in the 15th century.

Adopting a Tai princess

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Red River delta there were other stories which transformed in the medieval period as well. These stories were about the spirit of Mount Tân Viên. The *Departed Spirits* and the *Arrayed Tales* both contain a story about this spirit, and they both cite a work entitled the *Record of Jiao Region* which was compiled by a Tang Dynasty administrator by the name of Zeng Gun who served in the region in the 9th century. Citing this work, the *Arrayed Tales* provides more information about the early history of this spirit than the *Departed Spirits* does. It records, for instance, the following:

Zeng Gun of the Tang's *Record of Jiao Region* records that the Great King of the mountain was a mountain spirit surnamed Nguyễn, and that it was very potent and efficacious. During times of drought or flooding, when one beseeched [the sprite] for protection against calamity, it would respond right away. People never stopped to faithfully and reverently make sacrifices. It was often the case that if there was something which resembled a pennant seen floating about in a mountain valley on a clear day, the people in the area would say that the mountain spirit had appeared.⁷⁴

Hence, in its earliest form, there appears to have been a spirit on Mount Tân Viên which people worshipped for protection, particularly from flood and drought. By the 9th century this spirit had also apparently been anthromorphized and given the surname Nguyễn.

After the greater Red River Delta region came to be controlled by Vietnamese a century after Zeng Gun recorded the above information about the spirit of Mount Tân Viên, Vietnamese rulers continued to view that spirit as important. During a period of constant rains in 1073, for instance, Emperor Lý Nhân Tông had a Buddha image from Pháp Vân Temple brought to the capital so that he could seek its power in praying for clear skies, and also made offerings on Mount Tân Viên.⁷⁵ Then in 1145 a

⁷³ Interestingly, however, that information appears to have become part of the tradition when the compilers of a 19th century officially-commissioned history included that information by citing the *Treatise on Annan*. See Phan Thanh Giản et al., *Khâm định Việt sử thông giám cương mục* [Imperial Commissioned Itemized Summaries of the Comprehensive Mirror of Vietnamese History], (1881), A. 2674, Tiêu biên 1/1b-3a.

⁷⁴ Vũ Quỳnh, 2/21a-b.

⁷⁵ Ngô Sĩ Liên, BẢN KÝ 3/6b.

spirit shrine was constructed on Mount Tân Viên.⁷⁶ At the same time, however, there is also historical evidence which indicates that the people who lived around Mount Tân Viên were different from the Vietnamese rulers who were interested in the spirit there. In particular, in the *Complete Book* there are references to the “savages” (*man*) who lived around the mountain. That text records, for instance, that in 1207 Mount Tân Viên “mountain savages” (山蠻, *son man*) plundered, and in 1226 they fought with neighboring savages.⁷⁷

Finally, the 15th century *Treatise on Annan* also notes the presence of “savages” around Mount Tân Viên. As mentioned above, this work makes it clear that the “savages” who lived around Mount Tân Viên were various groups of Lào Tử. It then records the following about the spirit of the mountain:

Mount Tân Viên has a My Nuong spirit. Tradition has it that she is the Hùng king’s daughter. The king cherished her and wanted to find a capable person for a son-in-law. At that time there were two people from Mount Gia Ninh; one was called Mountain Sprite and the other was called Water Sprite. They could pass through mountain stones and submerge themselves in water. The two planned to marry [My Nuong] by offering local goods. The next day, Mountain Sprite presented the generous gifts of gold, silver, precious jewels, and peculiar birds and beasts, and requested to marry. He then took My Nuong and hid at Mount Lôi Động. Water Sprite arrived later. Mountain Sprite then moved My Nuong to the foot of Mount Tân Viên. Every year without fail Water Sprite gets angry and attacks. It is still like that today. My Nuong is also a potent monster (靈怪, *linh quái*). She often reveals her form as a person with long hair and a long robe, and is just like a beautiful woman.⁷⁸

What is fascinating about this account is that it indicates that My Nuong herself was an important spirit in the early 15th century. What is also significant is that My Nuong is clearly a Tai term. “*Mae nang*” in modern Thai, this term was rendered in Chinese characters to mean something like “enchanting lady” (媚娘, *meiniang*). In the 13th century, Song Dynasty official Fan Chengda made note of the use of this term among the “savages” of Guangxi, recording that “Tribal leaders sometimes take several wives, all of whom are called ‘enchanting ladies’ [*meiniang*]”⁷⁹ Add to this the fact that the *Treatise on Annan*, where the above excerpt comes from, goes beyond a mere reference to “savages” in this region to actually record which groups of Lào Tử inhabited the area, and it becomes obvious that My Nuong must have been a spirit which Tai peoples in the area worshipped.

⁷⁶ Ibid., BẢN KỶ 4/4b.

⁷⁷ Ibid., BẢN KỶ 4/25a and 5/1b.

⁷⁸ Rousseau, 254-255.

⁷⁹ Fan Chengda, 154.

That being the case, My Nuong was obviously different from the spirit surnamed Nguyễn whom Zeng Gun recorded information about in the 9th century, and her role in Vietnamese sources such as the *Departed Spirits* and *Arrayed Tales* is secondary to that of the mountain and water sprites. What all of this seems to point to is a complex process of population movements and contact between peoples. It is hard to say who was living around Mount Tân Viên in the 9th century worshipping a spirit surnamed Nguyễn. However, references in the *Complete Book* to “savages” there in the 13th century suggest that there were Tai peoples living there at that point. Mention of My Nuong in a secondary role to the mountain and water sprites in the 14th century Vietnamese texts, the *Departed Spirits*, indicates that Vietnamese had learned of this Tai spirit, perhaps during the times in which they had gone there to worship the spirit of the mountain as mentioned in the *Complete Book*, and had “domesticated” it into their own beliefs. Meanwhile, the 15th century *Treatise on Annan* indicates that the belief of the local Tai peoples around Mount Tân Viên in My Nuong herself was still flourishing on its own at that time.

While the above speculations are based on documentary evidence, it is much more difficult to explain why My Nuong was referred to as a Hùng king’s daughter. This does not appear to be a later addition to the story of this spirit. However, it is clear that the tradition of the Hùng kings as the first rulers of the Red River Delta is a late creation, one which probably took place in the 15th century. In other words, the Hùng king of the My Nuong story appears to predate the creation of the Hùng kings of antiquity. It is possible that the “Hùng” in the My Nuong story may have originally been a transcription of a Tai term, such as “*khun*,” a respectful term for a ruler, and that it was a coincidence that this was the same character as the one which eventually came to replace Lạc and be used as the name for the ancient rulers of the Red River delta. This might explain why this story from Mount Tân Viên was then added to the other stories which were developed in the 15th century about the Hùng kings. Whatever the case may be, it is clear that My Nuong was Tai, and it is also clear that when the tradition of the Hùng kings was created, the Tai were being peripheralized by the Vietnamese. The historical evidence from the 15th century demonstrates this, and the mysterious titles which we began this essay with indicate this as well.

Conclusion

To quote again, the *Complete Book* recorded that under the Hùng kings, “the princes were called *quan lang*, and princesses were called *my nuong*. Officials were called *bò chính*. From one generation to the next fathers passed [positions] on to their sons. This is called the way of the father [*phụ đạo*.]” All of these terms are Tai terms, or more accurately, they are mostly “Sinicized Tai” terms as they combine Tai and Chinese elements.

As for *my nürong*, the first term, “*my*,” is “*mae*” (ມ້າ) in Tai and literally means “mother,” whereas the second term, “*nang*,” means “maiden” and is a Chinese term, “*niang*” (娘). Similarly, “*quan lang*” consists of a Chinese term for “official” (官, *guan*) and another term which means “man” and which was used in official titles in medieval China, but was also used in titles for certain aboriginal peoples in the area of Guangxi. Fan Chengda, for instance, noted that some “savage” headmen were called “*langhuo*” (郎火).⁸⁰ *Quan lang* was used at least from the time of the Tang to refer to low-level officials who ruled over aboriginal peoples on behalf of the Chinese in the area of the Red River delta. For instance, a Tang-era text records that for generations members of a family surnamed Phùng served as “barbarian rulers” (夷長, *Di trưởng*/Yí zhang) on the edge of the delta and were called “*quan lang*.⁸¹

As for “*bò chính*,” this term likewise appears to be a hybrid term. The word “*bò*” could be the equivalent of either “*phu*” (ຝູ, person) or “*pho*” (ພອ, father) in Tai. “*Chính*,” meanwhile could be “*chieng*” in Tai, which means “citadel” and comes from the Chinese “*cheng*” (城). The “*phu chieng*” or “*pho chieng*” could therefore signify something like the “master of the citadel.” Finally, what the text refers to as the passing of rulership from one generation to the other, or the “way of the father” (*phu đạo*), could be a reference to an “elder” or “*phu thaw*” (ຝູເຫຼວ), or to a term which the Black Tai used to refer to their rulers, “*phu thaw*” (ຝູເຫຼວ).⁸²

This now leads us to the question of why these Sinicized Tai terms appear in a Vietnamese history compiled in the 15th century and claim to represent ancient titles. I argue that the inclusion of these terms in the *Complete Book* represents a process of identity creation. In the 15th century a new Vietnamese dynasty, the Lê Dynasty, came to power after the Chinese were driven out in 1427. The Lê Dynasty needed to demonstrate its legitimacy, and it did so through various means.

Militarily the Lê sought to expand their control into the northwest, a region which was inhabited by Tai peoples, and symbolically they sought to demonstrate their kingdom’s strength by creating an antiquity from which their kingdom could claim political descent. The inclusion of these Sinicized Tai terms in that new imagined history is significant because the Vietnamese appear to have been subjugating the Tai not only by conquering them, but also by delegating them to the distant past as well. The Tai were what the Vietnamese had once been, but now the world was different. That most of the terms included were Sinicized terms points to a political world which the Vietnamese and Tai had once shared. In the 15th century,

⁸⁰ Ibid., 180.

⁸¹ Lý Tê Xuyên, 2b. This text cites a *Record of Jiao Region*, which could refer to either Zeng Gun’s late 9th century text or a text with the same title, which likely dates from the early 9th century and was compiled by a Chinese official named Zhao Chang. This version of this *Departed Spirits* actually has “*lang quan*” instead of “*quan lang*.” However, other versions of this text have “*quan lang*” as that was the common term.

⁸² I thank Dr. Pittayawat Pittayaporn of Chulalongkorn University for information about this final term. Personal communication, 20 October 2011.

however, the Lê Dynasty started to become more deeply Sinicized, and this likely created a sense of distance between the Vietnamese elite and the Tai elite with whom they had contended on more equal terms not that long before.

As for other Tai terms, such as those dealing with wet rice agriculture which we can find traces of in the Vietnamese language, these were likewise terms which the Vietnamese likely learned in the period after the 10th century when Tai peoples began to migrate into the areas around the edge of the Red River Delta. This is a topic which I have to leave to Tai linguists to explain more fully, but from what I understand, a term such as “*muong phai*” (“irrigation canal”) which Phạm Đức Duong argued was adopted by the Vietnamese in antiquity is a relatively recent Tai word, as the “ph” sound in Tai, which this “ph” in Vietnamese is likely replicating even though it is pronounced like an “f” in Vietnamese emerged with the development of Southwestern Tai.⁸³ Finally, the issue of place names which begin with the word *cô* in Vietnamese or *gu* in Chinese remains a mystery. It seems unlikely that this is a Tai term as it is found predominately in the middle of the Red River Delta, and scholars have yet to provide evidence that there is a commonly used term in any Tai language of which this could be a transcription.

Hence, although a great deal has been written about the historical relationship between the Tai and the Vietnamese by employing certain Tai words as evidence, in reality many claims have been made without reference to what we actually know about the historical movement of Tai peoples and the development of their languages. When the actual historical and linguistic knowledge which we possess is harnessed to examine this issue, the way in which Tai words found their way into Vietnamese historical sources and the Vietnamese language becomes clear. The place of the Tai in Vietnamese history also becomes evident. The Tai and Vietnamese were not siblings who lived in harmony in antiquity and then went their separate ways. Instead, they were separate peoples who became medieval neighbors and contended with each other until the Vietnamese ultimately gained dominance over the Tai in the greater Red River Delta region in the 15th century.

However, this dominance was never complete. The Vietnamese never ended up extending their direct political control over many of the areas which Tai peoples inhabited. By the time the French conquered the area in the late 19th century, the Tai still lived a largely autonomous existence, although they had declared their

⁸³ On what is termed the “P/PH distinction” in Tai languages, see James R Chamberlain, “A New Look at the History and Classification of the Tai Languages,” in *Studies in Tai Linguistics in Honor of William J. Gedney*, ed., by Jimmy G. Harris and James R. Chamberlain (Bangkok : Central Institute of English Language, Office of State Universities, 1975), 49-66. Chamberlain also attempted to use Vietnamese historical sources to understand the history of Tai peoples in the region, however he did so out of the belief that the information in the Vietnamese sources about the Hùng kings is actually historical. See, for instance, his “The origin of Sek: Implications for Tai and Vietnamese history,” in *The International Conference on Tai Studies*, ed., S. Burusphat (Bangkok: Institute of Language and Culture for Rural Development, Mahidol University. 1998), 97-128.

subservience to the Vietnamese court for centuries by that point. As subservient but separate peoples, the Vietnamese left the Tai more or less on their own. The Vietnamese officials who dealt with them knew of their *mường* and *phụ đạo* and such words continued to occasionally make their way into Vietnamese sources. However, the actual knowledge which the Vietnamese had of their Tai neighbors remained limited. Ironically, perhaps it was this limited degree of knowledge which then enabled the abundance of information about the history of the Tai-Vietnamese relationship to emerge in the late 20th century. With a need to explain the past in ways which fit the demands of a modern multi-ethnic nation-state, and with limited historical and linguistic knowledge of the topic they were dealing with, Vietnamese scholars produced a great deal of information about the place of the Tai in the Vietnamese past, information which ultimately explained little about the past, but revealed a great deal about the imperatives of the present in Vietnam.