

The Ai-Lao and Nan Chao/Tali Kingdom: A Re-orientation

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ABSTRACT—Debates concerning the origins of the Thai or the Lao have not yet laid to rest the notion that the Ai-lao of west Yunnan and the peoples of the Nan Chao kingdoms are their ancestors. Such ideas are common-place in Laos, for example. This is partly because refutations have been presented in a fragmentary way. The following essay attempts a definitive refutation. This, however, is simply a prelude to presenting a strong case for the inclusion of the Nan Chao kingdom among the ancient states of Southeast Asia. In doing so the essay also shows how Nan Chao played an important role in the spread of Tai peoples across mainland Southeast Asia.

The following essay takes up an old debate about the origins of the Thai and the Lao, namely assertions that their ancestors were the Ai-Lao from Southwestern China and the people of the Nan Chao/Tali kingdom. These notions are still actively propagated by Lao historians, but less so by Thai historians. Yet as Winai Pongsripian writes in his survey of historiography on the Tai:

There is no problem in the history of South East Asia that has attracted such continuous interest from the international research community as that of the ‘Nan Chao problem’, ...yet we know that this issue has still not been definitively settled. (2002: 50-51)²

It remains alive in popular culture in both Thailand and in Laos. Sanya Polprasid’s *The Edge of Empire* (1988), published in Thai in 1973, gives a fictional account of the Thai battles with the Chinese as they were forced south from Sichuan to Nan Chao and finally to Thailand. It was a best seller. Documentaries on Thai television (beamed into Laos) still tell the ‘out of Nan Chao’ story. And, the Internet has given the issue a new forum. A recent history of the Shan repeats the tale (Sai Aung Tun, 2009: 7-12), and James C. Scott in his celebrated *The Art of Not Being*

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² Among Lao historians only Pheuiphanh and Mayoury Ngaosyvathn (1994) show an awareness of the conflicting arguments around this issue. But they do not resolve them.

Governed maintains that Nan Chao was Tai: “Their greatest state-making endeavour was the kingdom of Nan Chao and its successor Dali.” (2009: 141)

I argue that this view is wrong, but one reason why the argument has remained inconclusive is that there has not been a dedicated refutation of the claims, and so in the opening section of the following essay I attempt to lay this issue definitively to rest. But the second aim of this essay is to place the Nan Chao/Tali kingdom firmly within the history of ancient mainland Southeast Asia, ensuring that it is no longer a footnote in the Tai origins debate.

The Nan Chao/Tali Kingdom was one of the first Buddhist kingdoms of ancient Southeast Asia, preceded only by the Pyu Kingdom. The Buddhism that emerged there was its own synthesis of early Buddhism, but was also strongly influenced by developments in Tibet and China. The state revolved around a universal *chakravartin* king and was not a Chinese model *manqué*, as suggested by some writers who refer to it as ‘pre-Chinese’. This essay traces its initial contacts with the Tai and its role in their expansion. It is important to stress, however, that the following pages do not aim to explain the origins of the Tai.³

In an introduction entitled ‘The Cradle of the Shan Race’ to Archibald Ross Colquhoun’s *Amongst the Shans* (1885), a remarkable but idiosyncratic scholar, Albert Terrien de Lacouperie, argued that the modern Thai/Tai/Lao ancestors originated from “the Kiulung mountains, north of Setchuen and south of Shensi, in China proper.” (1985: lv) Furthermore, he argued that the modern Thai/Lao were refugees from the vanquished Nan Chao/Tali Kingdom in southern China. He elaborated on this argument in *The Languages of China Before the Chinese* (1887) where he provided the following lineage of this state:

In the south-west: The Tsen state in central Yunnan and the S.W., an offshoot of the state of Ts’u from 390 B.C., followed by the Ngai-Lao who, coming from the North, developed into the Luh tchao, or six principalities which became the powerful state of Nan-tchao, A.D. 629-860, afterwards the smaller one of Ta-li, until 1275 A.D., when it was subdued by the Mongol conquest. (1887: 111)⁴

³ For a recent overview, see Baker (2002). I should signal here that Tai primarily refers to a linguistic family, more broadly Tai-Kadai. Many people also use Tai, and even Tai-Kadai, to refer to an ethno-linguistic group. This usage is avoided here. Lao and Thai speakers are part of the Tai language family. Tai, un-aspirated, is also used as a pre-fix for many smaller groups. For example, Tai Dam (Black Tai).

⁴ Actually, the Mongol conquest was in 1253. Readers will have to bear with these older transcriptions of Chinese. Today, for example, Ts’u would be written as Chu, and Tchao as Chao or Zhao. I have not, however, attempted to standardise these in the quotations. Chinese invariably use the Pinyin spelling Nan Zhao or Nanzhao, as do some foreign authors. In the context of this essay, I will use Nan Chao. In Pinyin, Tali is Dali.

The kingdom of Nan Chao was formed out of six pre-existing smaller principalities, “five of them consisted of Lao or Laocian tribes, the sixth being Moso” (1887: 60), which were welded into a powerful central kingdom by Mong⁵ She, which as the southern-most principality was also called Nan Chao (Nan = south, Chao = principality/kingdom), a name then applied to the unified kingdom.

An equally idiosyncratic contemporary of De Lacouperie was the British colonial official and sinologist, E.H. Parker, who was an important contributor to the discussion about the origins of the Tai. He relates that: “In speaking five years ago [i.e. in 1887] to a Siamese of high rank at Bangkok, I found that they were totally ignorant of the history of the Shan Empire. Doubtless the Siamese migrated or were driven south when the Shan Empire broke up.” (Parker 1892: 346) He added: “The Chinese too are ignorant that the Nan-chao were Shans.”⁶

In fact, De Lacouperie was mainly interested in ‘deconstructing’ (as one would now say) Chinese claims to being the oldest ‘race’ in the region (race being the favoured concept at the time), and in demonstrating that many ‘aboriginal’ groups preceded them and indeed later became a constituent part of the ‘Chinese’ population. The Shan, or the Thai, or the Lao, were presumed to be historically prior to the Chinese, and this was their main interest for De Lacouperie. It did not stop him, however, from fabricating a sketch of their history that has remained influential ever since.

He drew attention to a group in western Yunnan called the Ngai-Lao or Ai-Lao (哀牢),⁷ which he claimed was a Tai group, and this was because the Nan Chao rulers claimed them as ancestors. Thus, if one believed that the Nan Chao kingdom was Tai, then the assumption that the Ngai-Lao were Tai also was easy. But as one of the historians of the Nan Chao, Charles Backus, writes:

It is more likely that the Nan-chao founders simply adopted the Ai-Lao as illustrious ancestors and took over Ai-Lao myths and legends as their own. Some early Chinese sources themselves indicate scepticism of this link by stating carefully that the Nan-chao founders originally inhabited Ai-Lao territory or that “they themselves say” (*tzu-yen*) that they were Ai-Lao descendants. (1981: 50)

Other kingdoms did much the same: the kings of Luang Prabang incorporated the Mon-Khmer kings of Muang Swa into their lineage, and the early Pagan king,

⁵ Here I use Mong, but in the various texts dealing with Nan Chao one also finds Meng and Muong. Once again, I will not alter such spellings in quotations.

⁶ In an earlier article it seems that he too was ignorant of this when he wrote that the Nan Chao was a state “probably representing the modern Lolos,” and that in “their language *shao* means ‘King’.” (Parker, 1886: 123) In fact, his earlier opinion was closer to the mark.

⁷ In Chinese, 哀 ‘ai’ means sorrow or pity, and 牢 ‘lao’ means fold or prison. It is clear that these characters were used to approximate phonetically in Chinese the name of these people in their own language.

Kalancacsā, who “provided a sense of continuity to the older traditions of the society by linking his genealogy to the real and mythical ancestors of Śrī Ksetra, the symbol of the Pyu past.” (Aung-Thwin 1985: 23) All countries go in search of illustrious ancestors!

There is only a small amount of information on the Ngai-Lao/Ai-Lao in Han texts⁸ and De Lacouperie draws on them liberally in his ‘Cradle of the Shan Race’:

In the year 69, Liu Mao, their general king, submitted to the empire with seventy-seven chiefs of communities, 51,890 families, comprising 553,711 persons... In A.D. 78, having rebelled against the Chinese officials... their king, Lei-lao, was defeated in a great battle, which caused many of their tribes to migrate into the present country of the northern Shan states. (1885: liii)

He adds in his longer treatise that after this, “We hear no more of them in Chinese records and they entered largely into the formation of the Nan-tchao state of Yunnan.” (1887: 57) In fact, like many other ‘ethnic groups’ enumerated in Chinese classical texts, they simply disappear.

The Ngai-Lao, he writes, “owe their existence to an intermingling of races told in a legend which contains the two words, and two words only, that we know of their language.” (1887: 57) Despite there being allegedly only two words extant from their language (transcribed in Chinese), De Lacouperie asserts that the “parentage of the Ngai-Lao is pretty well shown by all their particulars to be Täic.” (1887: 59) But, the two words, *kiu long*, the name of a legendary ancestor, only appear to be Tai because that is what De Lacouperie wishes them to be. *Kiu* supposedly means one’s back, and *long* to sit down, yet only the latter word approximates to Tai, and only if one deliberately discards all other possibilities. It is a fantastically thin thread on which to build a story of ethno-genesis. As for ‘all their particulars’, he does not elaborate. However, later Chinese chronicles do:

The Ngai-Lao barbarians all pierce their noses and their ear lobes hang down to their shoulders. Their chiefs who take the title of king have ear lobes so long that they extend even three inches lower. (Ma 1883: 177)

None of this is typically ‘Täic’. It must be remembered that Chinese chroniclers viewed the different peoples they saw, or had described to them, with a mixture of fascination and disdain not untypical of most colonial observers. Many of the peoples they encountered in Yunnan, for example, were considered semi-human, certainly uncivilised, and they were often cavalier in their descriptions of them.

⁸ A bilingual Chinese-Lao text appeared in 1997 containing the small amount that is known about them. Indeed, in a footnote the translator warns, “The problem of what ethnicity were the Ai-lao really in the Chinese texts remains confused.” (Thongkhian, 1997: 35) The warning has been ignored.

Even in Ma-Touan-Lin's extraordinary compilation in the 13th century of what was then known about minorities in China, his chapter on the Ngai-Lao suddenly spins off into a long discussion about the alleged existence of an animal called a 'sing-sing,' which supposedly could talk and whose social relations were just like those of humans (1883: 178-82). As Richard Strassberg suggests in *A Chinese Bestiary* (2002: 51), these descriptions are one of the ways the Chinese constructed the 'ethnological other'. There is one description, perhaps, that looks Tai: "The people know how to dye silk in several colours, manufacture very fine taffeta and other material stitched or embroidered in a very delicate manner" (Ma 1883: 177), except, as a single cultural artefact, it is shared with many different groups across the region, and by itself provides little guidance concerning ethnicity.

This, then, is broadly all we know about the Ngai-Lao/Ai-Lao. They were deemed to be Tai because they were claimed as ancestors by the Nan Chao Kingdom. Researchers like De Lacouperie argued that Nan Chao was Tai, therefore the Ngai-Lao/Ai-Lao had to be Tai too. But, as we will see, if Nan Chao is not Tai then we can be certain that the Ngai-Lao/Ai-Lao were not either.

De Lacouperie's theories about the Ngai-Lao and the Nan Chao kingdom were first adopted by other European writers, most notably the missionary William Clifton Dodd in *The Tai Race: Elder Brother of the Chinese* (1996, [1923]) and W.A.R. Wood in *A History of Siam* (1926). These texts had a direct impact on the Thai's understanding of their history.

The grandiose claims made by Dodd's book could not help but stoke nationalist fantasies. "The Tai-speaking race called themselves Lao from the earliest times" (1996 [1923]: 7), and "the Ai-Lao is the Chinese's older brother" (1996 [1923]: 4) and occupied the "whole width of modern China." (1996 [1923]: 9) Indeed, "As a race, the Ai-Lao were in at the beginning of history" (1996 [1923]: 6), and therefore are one of the oldest races in the world.⁹ The Lao have been especially enamoured by Dodd's claims and insist that Ai-Lao is the proper pronunciation. For any speaker of Lao, the attractions are obvious; transliterated from Chinese into Lao the meaning emerges as 'older Lao brother.' (Dodd's book immortalises this idea in its sub-title, *Elder Brother of the Chinese*.) That it has no such connotations in Chinese is simply ignored in a discourse thirsty for evidence concerning the ancient provenance of the Lao.¹⁰ And yet, the only evidence we have about the Ngai/Ai-Lao is in Chinese.

⁹ On top of this, De Lacouperie and Dodd had developed an ancient migration story for the Ai-Lao too, but we will not be diverted by this speculation -- although migration stories are important across the region. One of these theories had the ancient Tai migrating from the Altai mountains in Mongolia. That such a theory is not entirely forgotten is illustrated by the fact that in July 2012, in honour of HM Queen Sirikit's 80th birthday, the Tourist Authority of Thailand organised a trip for a group of Thais to drive from Altai city to Thailand. (*Prachatai* 8/8/2012)

¹⁰ In many different contexts one will hear Lao assert that they are a very ancient race.

Wood is less interested in such historical speculation as it lies outside his story of Siam, but he concurs that the Ai-Lao were Tai, and claims that their defeat by the Chinese caused them to emigrate south and form the Shan States. “The inhabitants of Siam are not descended from these Western Tai, but from the Eastern Tai, sometimes called Tai Noi.” (1926: 86) The latter had been infiltrating Siam “for hundreds of years before any Tai rulers appeared... forming Tai communities, and intermarrying with the Lawa and Mohn-Khmer inhabitants.” (1926: 49) Then, with the fall of Nan Chao, Siam received “a tremendous wave of immigrants, who fled Yunnan... providing a constant supply of Tai recruits from the north.” (1926: 52)¹¹

Khun Wichitmatra’s book, *Lak Thai, or Roots of the Thai People*, which first appeared in 1928, was influenced by Dodd,¹² and because it was published in Thai his book provided the framework for many subsequent Thai history books, as well as Lao ones.¹³ In it the Nan Chao and all its kings are Thai (just as in Lao texts they would all become Lao). The most important innovation from the Lao point of view was his use of the royal chronicles of Luang Prabang to identify the Nan Chao king P’i-lo-ko (r.728-48) with the legendary founder of Luang Prabang, Khun Borom (P’i-lo-ko being the name given him by the Chinese, according to Wichitmatra). He argues that this chronicle says that Khun Borom came from ‘above’, which in the old Thai chronicles could mean China. “In the Lan Xang chronicle it is called ‘Thaen’. This word ‘Thaen’ in Lao is translated ‘Sawan’ [heaven] and is the same word as ‘Tien’, which is the old name for the Thai kingdom of Nan Chao in the past.” (Wichitmatra 1975: 100-101)¹⁴

The connection of Nan Chao with this older kingdom in the region is pure

¹¹ Liang Yongjia (2010) claims that Wood’s book was translated into Thai, but I can find no evidence of this. Chen (1990: 209) says it was translated into Chinese in 1947.

¹² “I had written according to what Dodd has said about the issue,” he is quoted as saying by Chen Lufan (1990: 141). But the latter conveniently overstates Dodd’s influence. Dodd was simply a starting point for Wichitmatra, who combed through the available chronicles, and was acutely aware of the problems of using the chronicles when trying to construct a modern historiography. In particular, the problems of dating events enumerated in the chronicles. He attempted to compare them and invented some imaginative, but wrong, correlations between them because of the distorting lens of the Dodd thesis. His book, it should be noted, went through seven editions, and was continually updated and expanded until the final edition in 1975, which is the text I have used. For the early period, there is no difference between the 1928 edition and the 1975 one.

¹³ Excerpts from Dodd were first published in Thai in 1940 by Chulalongkorn University, and reprinted again in 1969 in response to an awareness that Chinese texts claimed Nan Chao was not Thai. The re-publication was in the interest of contributing to the debate. The 1940 introduction and the 1969 introduction, plus the translated texts, are available on the following websites: <http://www.baanmaha.com/community/thread44752.html>, <http://www.baanjomjut.com/library/tai/main.html>. It should be said that the Internet has given Dodd’s claims a new lease of life, at least among amateur historians. Chen Lufan (1990: 139) refers to a “Thai translation of Dodd’s book... by the Printing House of the Teacher’s Association of Bangkok in 1977.”

¹⁴ The Dian or Tien kingdom existed around the modern Kunming lake area from approximately 400 to 100 BCE and was Tibeto-Burman.

conjecture, and then once the Lao chronicle was mapped onto the Nan Chao kingdom, all kinds of other connections were facilitated. “Kwaen Sip Song Chu Tai was absorbed into the Thai Kingdom (Nan Chao) in 737 CE and King P’i-lo-ko or Khun Borom founded Nakorn Thaeng. Later, he placed his sons in charge of Muang Thaeng and other subordinate *muang* in the south of Nan Chao” (1975: 107), namely Hua Phan Thang Hok, Kaochi [Vietnam], Luang Prabang, Lan Na, and so on. Thus, legend became history.

Paul Le Boulanger’s *Histoire du Laos Français* (1931), the first modern history of Laos, repeats the Nan Chao exodus story. But the most important text on Lao history, which incorporates both the Ai-Lao and the Nan Chao story as foundation stones, is Maha Sila Viravong’s *Phongsawadan Lao* (Lao Chronicle), published in 1957 and from 1958 used as the main history textbook by the Royal Lao Government (1946-1975); and it was translated into English in 1959 as *The History of Laos*. It is probably the most influential text ever written on Lao history. In it Reverend Dodd is referred to as ‘An American professor’ (2001, [1957]: 9), and Maha Sila repeats Dodd’s claims about the ancient provenance of the Lao. He also draws liberally on Thai scholars, as Chalong Soontravanich points out, “the history of the pre-Lan Xang Kingdom as presented in Sila Viravong’s *Phongsawadan Lao* is essentially the same as the pre-Sukhothai Thai history as given in the works of Prince Damrong, Wichitmatra, Wichit Wathakan and Sathiankoset. The only difference was the substitution of ‘Lao’ for ‘Thai’.” (2003: 123) So the Nan Chao kingdom becomes an Ai-Lao, or simply Lao, kingdom in Sila’s book. He repeats Wichitmatra’s assertion that “Khun Borom Rasathirath was called in the Chinese chronicles, P’i-lo-ko.” (2001[1957]: 15)

The mapping of a central Lao legend onto history made it a particularly potent and memorable story. This conceptualisation has been repeated in a recent and ambitious three-volume history of Laos by Bounmi Thepsimuang, *The Origins of the Lao Race* (2006).¹⁵ This book adds a manoeuvre that maps the descendants of Khun Bulom onto all of the kings of Nan Chao. (2006: 166-175) He proclaims the ancient presence of Lao in peninsula Southeast Asia by asserting that ancient kingdoms like Dvaravati are Lao, and rather extraordinarily says that there was an ancient migration out of Laos to the north, south, east and west (see map, 2006: 107). Subsequently, he argues, the Lao who moved north and founded the Nan Chao/Tali kingdom, were driven back by the Chinese. The argument is far from coherent or properly documented, but it does attempt to combine an *in situ* genesis for the Lao, with a migration story from the north. By including the latter, it departs from

¹⁵ It is worth noting that volume one of Bounmi’s book has been translated into Thai and published in 2012 by Supapchai Printers and Tapada Publications, Bangkok. Given that so much of the book’s ancient history of the region is derived from Thai texts, one can observe a distorting feedback effect here. Thai readers will assume that this is based on original Lao research about Laos, when in fact it is largely Thai work filtered through a Lao lens.

the main official history of Laos produced by the People's Democratic Republic of Laos (LPDR) since 1975, *History of Laos: From the Earliest Times to the Present* (Ministry of Information and Culture, 2000), which ignores the Nan Chao/Tali story in order to produce an *in situ* account of Lao origins.¹⁶ The appearance of Bounmi's text, however, suggests that many people found the Ministry's account unsatisfactory, preferring instead the framework first set out by Maha Sila in which fable becomes fact.¹⁷

Early critiques

The Tai-ness of the Nan Chao/Tali kingdom, however, was challenged early on. A somewhat contradictory account of the kingdom's composition is given by Wilhelm Credner in his report on an expedition to Yunnan in 1930. He argues that there is no evidence that the Tai inhabited the Tali region, and that the "greater part of the original population of Yunnan... belongs to the Tibeto-Burman group, represented by the Lolo, Lissu (Lissaw), Nashi (Musseu) and Lahu..." (1935: 4) One of the most important groups in the Tali lake region are the Minchia. He says that they have not "replaced a departed Tai population but have always, also during the period of Tai power, constituted the bulk of the population." (1935: 8) And he notes, the Minchia language "shows absolutely no relation with Tai." (1935: 9) Essentially, Credner argues that Tai from the southern principality of Mong She captured the other principalities and ruled as a small Tai elite, while the bulk of the population remained non-Tai. Yet he provides no evidence that Mong She was ever Tai either, and only seems to uphold this argument because he remains impressed by the work of Dodd and H.R. Davies (Credner 1935: 2).

In 1945, the Chinese linguist, Lo Ch'ang P'ei, analysed the patronymic linking system distinctive of the Tibeto-Burman peoples who constituted this kingdom, and remarked, "evidence of the genealogy itself, let alone other objections, is enough

¹⁶ A key architect of this text was Souneth Phothisane, whose PhD (Souneth 1996) had examined the various versions and historical significance of the Khun Borom legend. In that study, he ignored Sila Viravong's argument and suggested an *in situ* location for the Lao. One suspects that he was persuaded to ignore convention by his supervisor Martin Stuart-Fox, and this perspective found its way into the official Lao history. Not long after, however, Souneth was dismissed from his position as director of the National Museum and left the Lao People's Revolutionary Party. He took up a university position in Thailand.

¹⁷ History and archaeology operate in two registers in the LPDR. The dominant one is a Lao discourse highlighting the growth and development of ethnic Lao culture. The subordinate discourse is one of the 'multi-ethnic' Lao people, which asserts the equality of all cultures inside Laos and their contribution to 'Lao national culture,' and usually favours an *in situ* account of Lao origins. Texts tend to code-switch between these two discourses, more or less according to convenience. Thus 60,000-year old human fossils can be claimed as Lao, or any ancient human activity. But the dominant discourse remains one of Lao kingdoms, in which the Nan Chao is an assumed precursor.

to refute” claims about Nan Chao being Tai (1945: 361).¹⁸ As for language, Backus writes:

Most of the Nan-chao words that have survived in Chinese transcription from that era reveal no similarity at all to the Thai language. Moreover, the three or four terms that do resemble the sounds of words which have the same meaning in modern Thai are all political in nature, like *chao*, terms such as are readily borrowed from one language to another. (1981: 49)

But it was on such thin threads that the original Tai thesis was first hung.¹⁹ Chinese historical sources generally remark that ‘*chao*’ is a local word for ‘prince’ (or in Lo Ch’ang-p’ei’s translation, ‘kingdom’), but they never suggest that it is a Tai word. Nan Chao is written in Chinese 南韶 (in modern Chinese *chao* is written 韶), but the earliest Chinese reference to a Tai use of the term *chao* that I can find is in the *Tien Hi* of 1807 (Che Fan 1908: 161) where it is written as 刁猛, i.e. *Chao Mong* (in the text it has the French transliteration *tiao-mong*; in pinyin it would be *diao*) – in other words, a completely different character.

Furthermore, no-one seems to have recognised that at the time of the formation of the Nan Chao kingdom in the 8th century there were no Tai kingdoms in existence, and if there were any Tai in the vicinity of the Nan Chao, their political organisation would have been no more substantial than a chieftainship. It is highly unlikely that even a moderately sized kingdom is going to borrow a central term of its political vocabulary from a marginal tribal group. On the other hand, migrating warrior chiefs, as the Tai were at that time, are more likely to borrow the political language of the most powerful kingdom in the vicinity.²⁰ It is significant that all the Tai speakers who remain in the ‘homeland’ region, in Guangxi, Guizhou or Guangdong, borrowed their key political terms from Chinese, and the term *chao* is absent.²¹ Those who migrated into the political sphere of Nan Chao mostly have the term *chao* or a cognate of it, which was and remains primarily an element of elite and polite

¹⁸ In 1950, a Japanese linguist, Matsumoto Nobuhiro, also argued that the language of the Nan Chao was Tibeto-Burman, (See Stott 1963: 192).

¹⁹ This speculation even included the meaning of the name of the city of Tali, where some suggested that its etymology approximated the Thai term for sea or lake – perhaps not surprising given the proximity of the Er Hai lake. Rock (1947: 32) cites the results of his enquiries with George Coedes, who informed him: “The Siamese word for ‘lake’ is *da-lé*, pronounced *t’a-lé*, but is probably a loan word from Khmer *danlé* pronounced tonlé (Tonlé Sap, Cambodia’s Great Lake). The use of Cambodian loan-words is usually restricted to South Siam, and I do not think that *da lé* or *ta lé* exists in any northern t’ai dialect. The etymology of Ta-li from *da lé* appears to me as extremely doubtful.”

²⁰ A similar interpretation is advanced by Winai (2002: 44), where he also remarks that “perhaps [the Tai] were influenced by [Nan Chao’s] political culture, including inheriting words like ‘Chao’ and ‘Meng’ [i.e. Muang].”

²¹ A dictionary of northern Zhuang (2007) has no such word.

forms of language. It is, in fact, plausible that the borrowing ran in the opposite direction, from the Nan Chao to the Tai, thus turning the traditional argument on its head. This claim is probably unprovable in any definitive way, but there is supporting evidence from another direction, in that the title was adopted by the Pyu in Burma. “The historical *Caw Rahan*, the saint-king with the Nan-chao title,” writes Luce of the first Pagan king in the 10th century (Luce: 1969: 9). In the 9th century, Chinese chronicles refer to the Mang tribes (a typically broad category that probably included the ancestors of the Burmese), who styled their kings as ‘mang-chao’ (Luce and Pe, 1935: 273).

There is no solid evidence from any of the Chinese chronicles, or any other chronicles, that Tai peoples occupied territory as far west as today’s Shan States before the 10th century, although they may have. Luce (1958: 7) seems to suggest that they were in that general area around the 9th century, but his claim is based on an equation of *Pai-yi* (白夷) in the Chinese chronicles with Shan. However, this term is used broadly and inconsistently, and is just as commonly rendered *Pai-Man* (白蠻).²² Both *Yi* and *Man* were used to signify barbarians, and in this context, white barbarians. This is a common problem with the Chinese chronicles where ethnic designations are inconsistent; broad in one instance narrow in another, to the point that even later Chinese chroniclers such as Che Fan in his *Tien Hi* of 1807 in the chapter *Chou Yi*, or on the submission of the barbarians of Yunnan, complains:

Yet the barbarian races are very numerous and difficult to categorise. Moreover, previously and still today, they are continuously transformed and split up; what has been written about them is really erroneous, and to repeat (the words of the ancient authors) would have the result of multiplying the confusions. (1908: 333)

Nevertheless, people determined to find Tai, or Shan or Lao, or any other ‘ethnicity’, will happily select one or other characteristic – tattooing, drinking through the nose, weaving, golden teeth, houses on stilts, and so on to support a particular group’s ancestral claims. But singular features are no guide to a social structure or culture.

The names of two of the original smaller kingdoms that formed the Nan Chao were Mong Sui and Mong She, and Parker claimed, “The two *Méng* are the Siamese-Shan word *muang*, ‘a State’.” (1890: 72) As for Camille Sainson, the translator of the *Nan-Tchao Ye-Che*, who also held the view that the Nan Chao was Tai, he thought that Mong was in fact a family name given by the Chinese as a kind of

²² Sainson writes, *Pai-yi* “白夷 is the name applied by the Chinese especially for the Thai in lower Yunnan and upper Laos” (1904: 25), but as we have indicated already, ethnic signifiers had no stable signifieds. Such terms may have narrowed their referents in a much later period, but if so, they cannot be read back into the past as Sainson appears to do here.

misrecognition of the term *muang* (1904: 25).²³ *Muang* is indeed a quintessential Tai political concept that involves ritual/political union at multiple levels, from a group of villages to a chiefdom, a kingdom, or in its modern sense a nation-state. It is, however, fairly clear that *Mong* was the family/clan name of the dominant *Wu Man* (black barbarian) family in two of these small states. This family would go on to control the Nan Chao too, whereupon their surname encompassed these small precursor kingdoms; the Chinese character is the same in both cases (蒙),²⁴ and indeed they would also refer to their kingdom as the Great Mong (大蒙). Later on, of course, after the Tai had established their presence in Southwest China, *Mong/Meng* (i.e. *Muang*) is used to designate minority districts, but the character in this case is 猛, with the radical for animals and barbarians, which only disappears in the late 20th century following the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), and is written 勐;²⁵ so *Mengla*, for example, today in Sip Song Panna is written 勐腊.

In the early 1960s Frederick Mote, a scholar of classical China, was on assignment in Thailand with the Ministry of Education and decided to use his knowledge of Chinese texts to contribute to the debate on 'Thai Prehistory'. He confirms that the Nan Chao people were Pai or Lolo, and more importantly adds that "We know little or nothing of the languages of any of the non-Chinese peoples of the South and Southwest until the 7th or 8th centuries A.D. or later," (Mote 1966: 26). Evidence for the existence for Tai languages in the region only begins in the 11th century. He concludes: "Thus, for the time being the Chinese historian can make a largely negative contribution to Thai prehistory, identifying peoples who were not Thais, and regions that were not Thai dominated," (Mote 1966: 27). In an earlier essay he remarks, "Whatever Thais there were in Nan-chao were only incidentally there, and had nothing to do with the establishment of the Nan-chao Kingdom," (Mote 1964: 105).²⁶ Mote's essay was taken note of by some Thai and foreign

²³ Sainson opens another can of worms when he writes: "Still today, many pa-yi [pai-yi] chiefs have the Chinese surname Tao 刁 because chief is "tao" in pa-yi. The Chinese have made a family name out of a title." (1904: 25) *Thao* is an honorific in Lao, and other Tai languages. The issue of the Chinese granting surnames to 'barbarian' groups that then become ethnonyms cannot be pursued here, but adds a major complication to any historical discussion of 'ethnicity'.

²⁴ See in particular Chavannes' (1901: 18) translation of the stele which is the main document left by the Nan Chao where the 'Mong Kingdom' is used. Chavannes, who also subscribed to the idea that Nan Chao was Thai, commented, "*mong* is the name of the family of the king which became the name of the kingdom. It therefore seems impossible here to use a transcription of the *thai mong* or *muong*..." Prior to this, in an examination of steles from the years 405 and 458, Chavannes points out that the family name Ts'ouan [Tuan] of an aspiring family was applied mistakenly by the Chinese to a whole "group that we call today the Lolos." (1909: 6) Later, the Tuan would be identified with the Kingdom of Tali. In Pinyin, Tuan is written Duan. In footnote 19 above we have seen that Winai interprets 'Meng' as 'Muang', but in his case he is saying that the Thai borrowed the word 'Meng' to construct the word 'Muang'. It would be difficult to sustain this contrary reading.

²⁵ ▪ is a rising tone, while 蒙 is a high tone.

²⁶ Blackmore's (1961) essay contains similar points, but its publication as part of a symposium in Hong Kong meant that it fell below the radar of Thai scholars

intellectuals, but it was in some ways too Sinocentric in orientation to have a real impact. But in the late 1960s, some debate had begun in Thailand about the Nan Chao and its alleged Thai origins, leading to the re-publication of Dodd by Chulalongkorn University. But the debate really only took off in the 1980s following the collapse of the Cultural Revolution and the opening up of China to outside researchers, and the renewed activity of Chinese academics. The interest initially focussed on the Dai in the Sipsong Panna, but the Chinese side was primarily interested in refuting the widely-held view that the Thai had been forced south into Thailand by Chinese aggression.

At this time, partly due to advances in archaeology that showed that humans had lived in Thailand for a very long time, some Thai researchers were ready to abandon the Nan Chao origins claim, epitomised by Sujit Wongthes's article in *Sinlipa Watthanatham*, "The Thai were always here" (1986), while others remained unconvinced. At the Thai Studies Conference in Kunming in 1990, the Chinese side launched a full-scale attack on the Nan Chao origins thesis, publishing a bilingual edition of Chen Lufan's articles in *Whence Came the Thai Race? – an Inquiry* (1990). While the Chinese researchers had a better grasp of the long mis-used Chinese chronicles and a better understanding of the history of Yunnan than their Thai counterparts, their conspiratorial attacks on 'western imperialist' scholars like De Lacouperie, their forced Marxist interpretations of Nan Chao, and their desire to exonerate the Chinese from any charges of aggression, as well as their assertion that Yunnan had always been inalienable Chinese territory, vitiated their claims in the eyes of sceptics.²⁷ The Franco-Lao scholar, Amphay Doré (1990: 208-9), for instance, remained unconvinced of the Chinese arguments, although he acknowledged that his own argument for the Tai-ness of Nan Chao was not without problems.²⁸ To date, the Lao have simply ignored the Chinese arguments.²⁹

There is one last twist to the Ngai/Ai-Lao story that needs to be considered. De Lacouperie again:

At a certain period of the disintegration of this kingdom, some of them moved southwards, and during more than four centuries (A.D. 1048-1427) they proved most obnoxious neighbours to the Annamites. Their name and probably a

²⁷ Liang (2010) highlights the political agenda of the Chinese scholars, in particular how it was framed by the concept of 'minzu' and Chinese nationalism.

²⁸ Unfortunately I was unable to consult Amphay Doré's PhD thesis (1987) until after this article had been accepted for publication. It is an inventive attempt to sustain the thesis that the Nan Chao elite was Tai, but it involves considerable historical speculation in order to get the Tai in the right place at the right time. In short, he furnishes no hard evidence. He also makes another speculative leap when he asserts a migration of 'Tai' from the kingdom of Yelang in Guichou to the territory of the Ai Lao, but later research on Yelang disproves such assertions (Herman, 2009).

²⁹ A recent article by the director for historical research at the Lao Academy for Social Sciences (Chanthaphilit 2012: 31) repeats the old Ai-Lao/Nan Chao argument.

portion of this population are still in existence west of the Annamese province of Thanh Hoa. (1887: 58-9)

The sources for his claims are a Vietnamese history textbook from 1875,³⁰ and an official geography from 1829 in which the Ai-Lao are mentioned. Parker too uses similar modern sources to vouch for the ongoing existence of the Ai-Lao:

It may be mentioned that in the modern Annamese History... modern Tonquin and Hué, the ancient Champa, are both said to have the *Ailau* on the west, so that the ancient name is conserved to this day. (1890: 93)

This self-serving cross-referencing, however, fails to enquire into how the ‘Ai-Lao’ ever got into these 19th century histories of Vietnam. Contemporaries of De Lacouperie and Parker were more circumspect. Sainson warned: “哀牢. These are not to be confused with the Ai-Lao spoken about in a general way by the Annamites, and found in the backward areas of Thanh-hoa, of Nghê-an and Quang-tri” (1904: 25), and Luce added: “For the Lao (獠) of upper Tonkin, Keui-chou and Sse Ch’uan,... They must not I think be confused with 哀牢 Lao (=Ngai-Lao).” (1924: 117)³¹

The eminent Vietnamese historian Nguyễn Thế Anh informs me:

The term ‘Ai Lao’ was borrowed from Chinese texts, beginning with the *Hou Han Shu* [398-445]... A note of *Kham dinh Viet su thong giam cuong muc* (Complete mirror of Viet history) says that the term Ai Lao designated many different tribes dispersed in the mountainous area on the Vietnamese border, as well as in the countries of Lao-qua (hence Laos) and Van-tuong (Ten thousand elephants).³²

In other words, it was a term introduced into Vietnamese when the courts excavated Chinese texts in order to construct their own imperial history. Ai-Lao in this context not only fitted the Lao and Tai groups, but almost any minority group

³⁰ If one looks at the *Cours d’Histoire Annamite* by Trường-Vinh-Ky (1875), it is very clear that the various references to the ‘Ai-lao’ are to the Lao.

³¹ It should be noted that both Sainson and Luce held the then common view that Nan Chao was Tai. But in lectures given in France in 1966, Luce (1985: 100) made it clear that he had changed his mind and that he had been convinced that the Nan Chao people were essentially Lolo.

³² Personal communication on 6 January 2012. Nguyễn Thế Anh adds: “*Khâm dinh Việt sử thông giám cương mục* was commissioned by imperial order in 1856 and was re-edited in 1871, 1872, 1876, 1878 before being engraved on wood to be printed in 1884. This is not the first general history of Viet-Nam. Previously, there was *Dai Viet su ky* (Historical memories of the Great Viet) composed by Le Van Huu in 1272, and *Dai Viet su ky toàn thu* (Complete historical memories of the Great Viet) composed by Ngo Si Lien in 1479.”

on its western border.³³ Gasparadone investigates a stele dated 1336 that records a campaign against the ‘miserable Ai-Lao’ in Thanh Hoa. While noting some of the confusions relating to ethnic nomenclature, he concludes that at this time “entered into history Muong Xua (Java)-Luang Prabang-Muong Lao: our Ai-Lao.” (Gasparadone 1971: 12)

Research by Vietnamese ethnographer Nguyễn Văn Huyền in the late 1930s on a group of ‘Ai-Lao’ performers at a Vietnamese ritual reveals clearly that this term is used primarily for the Lao.

Throughout the festival a troupe of Ai-Lao dance and intone chants in honour of the spirit. Following tradition, this troupe is of Lao origin. The Lao each year sent as tribute to the sovereign of Annam a troupe of singers... When Laos ceased being a tributary of Annam the king gave the responsibility to the village of Hoi-xa, situated along the Canal of Rapids (Gia-lam phu, Bac-ninh province) to raise a troupe of singers who could offer the Ai-Lao rhythm to the spirit. (1939: 157-58)

This festival, which is considered to be hundreds of years old, perhaps at one time did include Lao performers, but, if so, there is no longer any trace of this in the songs performed.

The Nan Chao in Southeast Asia.

Up until the 13th century, mainland Southeast Asia included most of present day Yunnan province in China. This northern region of Southeast Asia was populated by diverse ethnic groups, many of them Sino-Tibetan, and a few Han stragglers and settlers, and it was governed by non-Sinitic institutions. In 1253, Mongol cavalry, coming from another culture area altogether in the north, overwhelmed the governing institutions of these societies and paved the way for their irreversible incorporation into the Chinese empire by the Yuan (1271-1368) and the Ming Dynasties (1368-1644). On the other hand, heavily Sinicised northern Vietnam seceded from the Chinese Empire in the 10th century and resisted Ming attempts to re-incorporate them. Truncated in the north by the loss of Yunnan, mainland Southeast Asia still stretched as far as central Vietnam until the 15th century with the kingdom of Champa.

What we now refer to as mainland Southeast Asia came into being from the 6th to 9th centuries as substantial states began to form across the region and interact with one another: Dvaravati in the 6th century, Pyu and Champa in the 7th century, Nan Chao and Angkor in the 8th century and Pagan in the 9th century. These developments

³³ It is worth noting that if one consults the Historical Atlas of Southeast Asia by Jan Pluvier (1995) for the period of the Nan Chao, the northern areas of Laos today and into Vietnam are marked as ‘Ai-lao,’ giving it a concreteness that only the magical power of maps can impart.

registered the diffusion of Indian influence spreading Hindu and Buddhist ideas of statecraft and social organisation. The Nan Chao/Tali kingdom's part in this, however, has been obscured by China's expansion and the seeming naturalness of the boundaries it established between itself and nations to the south following the Ming ascension. Tatsuo Hoshino's (1986) study of medieval Laos highlighted this area, and he criticised Georges Coedès, the doyen of historical studies of traditional states in the region, for neglecting it: "In his books of synthesis, G. Coedès underestimated the importance of northern Indochina: Yunnan and the vast valley of the middle Mekong." (1986: 41-2)

Strangely, given the importance of the region and Nan Chao for early Burmese history, the latter is not included in Michael Aung-Thwin's list of classical Southeast Asian states at the beginning of his history of Pagan (1985: 1). In the latest grand overview of the region by Victor Lieberman, only a brief reference is made to Nan Chao's fall, and then simply as a prelude to Tai expansion: "By collapsing or weakening the great empires of Nanzhao (1253) and Pagan, Mongols removed the chief military barriers to the southward movement of Tai warriors and settlers." (2003: 241) A map that accompanies Chris Baker's (2002: 6) exploration of the origins of the Tai shows the dispersal of Tai speakers out of their 'homeland' in Guangxi, wherein they travel west and south.³⁴ In fact, their route west more-or-less traces the southern boundary of the Nan Chao/Tali kingdom. So, contrary to Lieberman, the Nan Chao was more likely an obstacle to the Tai moving north rather than south. When significant numbers of Tai began their journey west and southwest, partly in response to Chinese pressure around the 9th century, the major kingdom that they encountered, or whose influence they felt at a distance, was the Nan Chao.

Michael Aung-Thwin's failure to include the Nan Chao among the classical Southeast Asian states is surprising given the importance of Nan Chao for the evolution of the Pyu state and of Pagan. The grand kingdom of Nan Chao was created during the 8th century as the leaders of the southernmost Chao, Mongshe, conquered other similar, but weaker, kingdoms to its north, all of which had emerged in the previous century. It was P'i-lo-ko (728-48) who began this process of aggrandisement, with the support of the Tang rulers, who were in search of allies in the region. His son, Ko-lo-feng (748-79), who continued his father's work with zeal, was the first to establish tributary relations with the kingdom of Pyu. From 808 onwards, the Nan Chao King added the Pyu title *P'iao-hsin* (Lord of the Pyu) to his

³⁴ Baker (2002: 6) explains: "The arrows show Chamberlain's [linguistic] 'family tree' overlain on the map. The arrows do not show migration routes (which were much more complex)." Of course, the map is a simplified representation, but the migration 'complexities' that Baker explores in his essay are vitiated by his sources, such as Leeshan Tan's sino-centric readings of the Chinese texts, and Baker uncharacteristically accepts an uncritical reading of the Shan chronicles by a Shan author. In fact, the map can be considered a reasonable approximation of the dispersal of Tai speakers.

titles to show Nan Chao's growing control of northern Burma.³⁵

The *Man Shu* written in the 9th century by Fan Ch'o, a text hostile to the Nan Chao, writes almost lyrically about the kingdom of Pyu:

In front of the gate of the palace where the king of (this) kingdom dwells, there is a great image seated in the open air, over a hundred feet high, and white as snow.

It is their wont to esteem honesty and decency. The people's nature is friendly and good. They are men of few words. They reverence the Law of the Buddha. Within the city there is absolutely no taking of life.

The men mostly wear white *tieh*. The women on top of their heads make a high coiffure, adorned with gold, silver, and real pearls. They wear for show blue skirts... and throw about them pieces of gauze silk. When walking, they always hold fans. (1961: 90-1).

But then in A.D. 832, "the *Man* rebels [Nan Chao] looted and plundered P'iao [Pyu] kingdom. They took prisoner over three thousand of their people." (ibid)

In this context, one can understand the eminent historian of Burma, G.H. Luce's hostility to the Nan Chao too, where he speaks of the kingdom's 'terror' and 'tyranny'. But both Luce and Aung-Thwin recognise that Nan Chao's destruction of the northern Pyu Kingdom provided the space into which the proto-Burmese could flow from the north, perhaps propelled along as troops in the Nan Chao army. Luce writes, "the *Mranmā* longed to escape the Nan-chao yoke; and took their first opportunity to do so after A.D. 835, by descending to the hot malarious plains of central Burma..." (1985: 103) But the Tibeto-Burman cultural features they shared with the peoples of Nan Chao went with them, and as Aung-Thwin notes, the kinship reckoning of the founders of Pagan (A.D. 849) "follow the typical Nanchao nomenclature." (1985: 20)³⁶

Luce, however, was fair enough to recognise the complex position of a 'Lolo' kingdom caught between the expanding empires of the Tang Chinese and the Tibetans, and Nan Chao's need, at times, to appease and, at times, resist both: "Nan-chao did just this in Western Yünnan, for three centuries, but needed all its resources of Lolo man-power to do so." (1985: 103)³⁷ Bakken's is an excellent

³⁵ Ecsedy (1984: 182) writes, "from 808 on, Nanchao's kings were mentioned in Chinese records with this title alone." We can note that this is yet another example of portmanteau political titles. See also Bakken (1981: 102).

³⁶ Serious early researchers, like Pelliot (1904: 165-6), were so influenced by the Nan Chao as Tai hypothesis that he, for instance, argued 'remarkable Burmese influences' ran in the opposite direction. He knew that the patronymic system in Nan Chao was not Tai, therefore it could only have come north from Burma. Among other things, the historical sequence makes this impossible.

³⁷ 'Lolo' is an old ethnic category used infrequently today, as they are classified under the modern category of Yi.

study of Nan Chao's high-wire diplomacy; it was through skilful diplomacy and warfare that Nan Chao grew into one of the largest classical kingdoms in mainland Southeast Asia.

Wilfred Stott presents a compelling picture of Nan Chao as a militarised state – perhaps not unlike ancient Sparta:

In their way of life the Nan-chao people made no difference between civilians and army. All were liable for military service, and in fact the spare time of the country people was largely spent in competitions of a military type. And this gave the people a zest for military skill. (1963: 219)

They had inflicted terrible defeats on the Tang armies sent against them and, as Stott argues, this must have created a great deal of pride in their military prowess. Military strength, and the fact that the Tang dynasty was wracked by internal divisions, provided the conditions for Nan Chao's expansion. Later, the secession of Vietnam from the Chinese empire closed the route from Sichuan through Yunnan to the sea ports of Annam, and so the next great Chinese dynasty, the Song, paid little attention to the successor to the Nan Chao, the Tali Kingdom (Backus 1981: 162-3).³⁸ Stott also summarises the meteoric rise of Nan Chao:

The extraordinary development of Nan-chao, in a matter of some thirty years, from a very small principality to the south of the Ta-li lake to a strong kingdom with frontiers which extended some thousand miles from east to west and six or seven hundred from north to south, is a remarkable phenomenon... Not only so, but this wide dominion was maintained for a long period of some five hundred years. The weakness of the latter part of the T'ang Dynasty would account partly for this... There was no further interference from the Chinese side until the Mongols had gained control of China. But this does not explain how a kingdom composed of such heterogeneous types as Nan-chao held together for so long. (Stott, 1963: 206)

It ruled over all of Yunnan, upper Burma, and western Guizhou, an ethnically diverse domain. How did they do it? asks Stott. Alongside this domain, we should place Nan Chao's extraordinary military expeditions down as far as Cambodia and through pre-Tai Chiang Mai, and their expulsion of the Chinese from Annam in the mid-9th century.

³⁸ Taylor (2013: 49-50) makes the point that the military had been weakened by the rise of Confucian influence during the Song, and thus any desires to re-take northern Vietnam were restrained. Furthermore, he suggests that this Song Confucianism had an inward looking dynamic which redefined the Viets as lying outside the Chinese realm. This attitude was at work in relation to the Nan Chao/Tali kingdom too.

Stott argues that expansion and cohesion was due to the military and political genius of Ko-lo-feng, his ability to incorporate both captured and disaffected Chinese officials who provided him with a language of government, and his ability to make strategic alliances through marriage. Stott says that the system of government was drawn from the Tang model, but, in fact, if one looks closely at the Nan Chao control of land and grain, its willingness to relocate dissident peoples *en masse*, such as the Tuan, then the model is strikingly similar to the short-lived Chin (Qin) empire (221-201 BC). In fact, however, it was its own amalgam in which Buddhism played a central role.

Strangely, Stott's otherwise excellent article makes no mention of the fundamental role of Buddhism in the Nan Chao/Tali kingdom, which not only provided a theory and ideology of kingship, and a resource for uniting diverse peoples, but also an ideology of expansion.

Buddhism and Nan Chao/Tali

Buddhism began its entry into China from India during the Han period along the northern Silk Road, the southern Silk Road by sea, and the southwestern Silk Road through Yunnan. The Han command post established at Yung Chang on Yunnan's western frontier (from which we have our earliest information about the Ngai/Ai-Lao), was an important staging point along this southwestern route. "Buddhism entered the region of Southwest China by several different routes, and the three leading schools of Buddhist thought, Theravada, Mahayana, and Tibetan Buddhism all made their presence felt along different spurs of the Southwest Silk Road. The kingdoms of Nanzhao and Dali in turn absorbed elements of all three traditions." (Anderson, 2009)

This route was a conduit for Indian Buddhist missionaries and scriptures, and indeed, a foundation myth of the Kingdom of Nan Chao is linked with a peripatetic, miracle performing Indian Buddhist monk who heralded its formation under its leading family. But Buddhist missionaries had been active in the south for hundreds of years, and the Pyu had effectively been Buddhists since the 4th century, absorbing and transforming the various forms of ancient Buddhism. A kind of Hinayana-Theravada type of Buddhism became dominant there, but other sects were represented too, and both Pali and Sanskrit were used (See Stargardt 1990; also Glover, 1996: 80).

The reception of Buddhism in Nan Chao was typical of mainland Southeast Asia, in that it was absorbed in a syncretic and even eclectic way.³⁹ Unlike China, it

³⁹ Some writers have stressed, on the other hand, Buddhism's own flexibility; it "was already a complex adaptive system that had developed in response to the needs of South and Central Asian communities. It brought with it a sophisticated repertoire of multiple cosmologies and notions of authority." (Orzech, 1998: 132) Coedes stresses the continued presence of what he calls the "pre-Aryan elements and many survivals of a basic culture common to the monsoon area of Asia," to

faced no strong opposition from indigenous religious and philosophical systems, such as Confucianism and Taoism, which denounced Buddhism as foreign. For example, as Buddhism's influence grew in China, Wang Tu, a scholar in the mid-4th century, wrote:

Buddha, having been born in the Western Regions, is a foreign god.... Institutions for Chinese and barbarians differ, and spheres of men and gods are different. What is alien differs from what is Chinese, and sacrifices are different in ceremonial procedures. As to the clothing and rituals of the Chinese, it is not proper to intermingle them. (Ch'en, 1952: 169)

This sentiment would culminate in the massive backlash against Buddhism in the late Tang. In Nan Chao, on the other hand, there is no evidence of similar opposition to the spread of Buddhism. Indeed, the Nan Chao became a refuge for Ch'an (Zen) and other esoteric Buddhist sects fleeing the late Tang repression (IMEC, 2009: 79); and by this time, the large Chongsheng Temple in Tali had become a major site of Buddhist practise in the region and an important pilgrimage site.

Chinese influence on Buddhism in Nan Chao was important, and Henrik Sørensen claims that Buddhist texts used there were 'exclusively' written in Chinese. Yet, one should consider first that these are the main texts preserved following the collapse of the kingdom, and second, as he recognises, Sanskrit played an important role as a 'magic language' that many monks knew, which indicates the presence at one time of many Sanskrit texts.⁴⁰ And from an anthropological point of view, the

explain the 'ease' and 'rapidity' of the spread of Indian culture. Referring to Paul Mus, he writes: "The Indochinese do not seem to have reacted towards Indian influence as if they were being confronted with an alien culture," and they "may not always have been aware of changing their religion when adopting that of India." (1962: 52) This applies to Yunnan too.

⁴⁰ As for other scripts and languages of Nan Chao, we only have the tantalising observation in the Man Shu: "the Man barbarian script was originally not fixed in one pattern: there are (different) sorts of writing." (1961: 115) Devière (1886: 104) claims that 'Pa-y' (Pai-yi 白夷), a category that he assumes is unambiguously Tai, was the everyday lingua franca of Nan Chao, and that it was written using Tibetan script. He reproduces a Tibetan communication from the Qing period that he claims is 'Pa-y', although the French translation he provides is by a French missionary taken from a Chinese translation of the Tibetan, and which the latter claims is 'Pa-y'. There is no serious evidence that I know of concerning any Tai use of Tibetan script (C.f. Sai Kam Mong 2004). One suspects that this is yet one more case of early researchers being misled by their assumption that Nan Chao was a Tai polity. One thing is certain, however; that as a multi-ethnic polity, Nan Chao was also a multi-lingual one. Chavannes (1909) examines a stèle from the year 971 which although written in Chinese characters is "very difficult to understand;... and hardly intelligible to Chinese," all of which shows that it was "created by a non-Chinese race." (1909: 44) This stèle recorded an agreement between Nan Chao generals and representatives of 'the 37 tribes'; "Thus we conclude," writes Chavannes, "that Chinese writing was, in that époque, the only means of communication between those who made up the tribes of southern China." (1909: 44) A Lolo script from 1533 had been discovered, "But nothing permits us up to now to say that Nan-tchao had [such] a writing." (1909: 44-5)

separation of ‘magic’ from everyday Buddhist practise, which he suggests, is a dubious scholastic exercise. Buddhism and magic were no doubt intertwined back then as they are today. It is apparent that both languages played an important role in Nan Chao/Tali’s religion, and Sørensen does recognise that Buddhism there “was a hybrid,” and that “a highly local form of Buddhism came into being.” (2011: 379; see also Li 2009)

Esoteric Buddhism emerged as the dominant form in Nan Chao/Tali, with the cult of Avalokiteśvara (the compassionate saviour of Mahayana Buddhism) one of its defining features. This “flourishing local form of Esoteric Buddhism... was only partly under the influence of Chinese culture” (Sørensen, 2011: 386), and John Guy’s study of the iconography of Avalokiteśvara shows “the degree to which they fail to emulate Chinese models of the period.” (1995: 64) Situated at the intersection of important trade routes, the Nan Chao/Tali rulers were inclined to see themselves as part of a larger Hindu-Buddhist world, and transmitted and absorbed influences from it.⁴¹ In its iconography, Guy discerns influences from Mon-Dvaravati traditions, from the Chams and, not surprisingly, the Pyu. Moreover, in a remarkable handscroll from A.D. 947 known as ‘The illustrated history of Nanzhou’, which gives an essentially Buddhist account of the kingdom, Guy notes the various elements designed to signal the kingdom’s separation from China. Referring to the royal household he writes: “they wear only a *dhoti*-style lower garment tied in the manner which bears close comparison with the [Avalokiteśvara] image itself... The Nanzhou subjects depicted in this painting were clearly concerned to assert their Yunnanese ethnicity and their attire contrasts sharply with those dressed in the Chinese manner.” (1995: 71) Guy’s observations place Nan Chao/Tali culturally within the Southeast Asian mainland.

We have no information on the early insinuation of Buddhism into the practises of the Nan Chao rulers, and little information on their pre-Buddhist beliefs.⁴² But based on their kinship system and on some remarks in the *Man Shu*, we can deduce some kind of ancestor worship, and no doubt shamanistic practises. It is not quite clear what is meant by the term ‘Great Devil Lord’ in the *Man Shu* (1961: 12), although it suggests a shaman, and they were said to preside over the tribes of Pai (White) Man and Wu (Black) Man. The *Man Shu* says of the Wu (Black) Man:

Whenever a person dies, three days after the death they burn the corpse. The remaining ashes they cover with earth and soil, reserving only the two ears.⁴³

⁴¹ Pelliot’s (1904) study is a pioneering statement of this, and Yang (2009) revises and updates this view, adding a ‘global’ perspective.

⁴² Studies of the native ‘gods’ Benzhu, among the Bai certainly provide some idea of what these practices and beliefs may have been (See Fitzgerald 1941, and Schmitt 2007).

⁴³ This is puzzling, for the ears could not have survived cremation unless they were removed first.

If (the dead person) belongs to the family of the Nan-chao, they store them in a golden vase, adding a layer of silver as a box to contain it. They store this deep in a separate room. At the four seasons they bring it out and sacrifice to it. (Fan Ch'o, 1961: 79)

The *Man Shu* contrasts this with the Pai (White) Man who bury their dead “in accordance with Chinese rule.” We can probably deduce several things from this information, namely that cremation is indicative of Buddhist influence on the Wu Man, or if this was an indigenous practise of theirs it would have segued easily with Buddhism. And John Guy seems to suggest that a Buddhism that was a kind of shamanism writ large would have been attractive.

The supremacy of the bodhisattva cult may be the result of resonance that the worship of a compassionate, all-caring, healing deity struck with indigenous beliefs. The magical/supernatural aspects of bodhisattva behaviour and their interventionist role in ensuring personal welfare and salvation may have all contributed to the success of the cult. (1995: 76)

It is certain, however, that once a larger kingdom had been created out of a number of smaller *chao*, the ruling dynasty would have been receptive to religious and philosophical views offering a grander vision, and Buddhism was on hand to supply it. By the end of the 8th century it was supreme, and “The entire ninth century was a great era for the building of Buddhist temples all over Yunnan.” (Backus, 1981: 128)

King Lung-Shan (877-97) adopted the title of Maharaja (*mo-ho-lo-ts'o*) and it was after this that Buddhism can be seen as a ‘state religion’, something that was manifest in the Tali kingdom when during the 10th and 11th centuries six kings abdicated in order to become Buddhist monks (Rocher, 1899: 139-45).⁴⁴ Greater penetration of religion and state is hard to imagine; and moreover it underlines the difference in both conceptualisation and structure of the Nan Chao/Tali state compared with the state in imperial China, and its affinities with the Buddhist kingdoms of Southeast Asia.

Drawing on these regional resources for a philosophy of kingship, the Nan Chao/Tali rulers ritually seated themselves at the centre of mandalas, which also appropriated Chinese imperial rituals of “enfeoffing five mountains and four rivers” around the centre (Liang 2011: 245), to bolster their own claims to imperial status. After all, the Nan Chao/Tali rulers had acquired titles, such as emperor’s brother, King of Yunnan, or Prince of Piao, among others, from the adjacent states of Tibet,

One can only wonder whether the Chinese author mistook ‘ears’ for ashes or bones.

⁴⁴ See the splendid catalogue of Buddhist relics and artefacts from the Nan Chao/Tali kingdom gathered together in a largely bi-lingual Chinese-English catalogue by Zhong Yangshen (2008).

China and Burma. While they conducted careful diplomacy with China, the Nan Chao saw themselves as equal to the states surrounding them. Internally, of course, the kings presented themselves as the centre of the universe and adopted titles such as Maharaja to reflect this. As with the other states to the south, this was a Cakravartin kingship charged with the task of the defence and spread of Buddhism. Michael Aung-Thwin (1985: 57) presents the purpose of such kingship clearly:

The *dhammarāja* was more than a provider of political order, however; he, like the Indian Buddhist king Aśoka, the *dhammrāja* exemplified, must secure moral order as well. Force could be used to subdue rebellious subjects instead of moral suasion only if no other recourse was available. Because kingship, like the kingdom itself, was a political institution that had to be justified by certain Buddhist precepts concerning unavoidable war and killing, wars of unification became efforts ‘to seek holy relics’, proselytize Buddhism, and acquire the ‘pure scriptures.’ These were *dhammavijaya*, ‘righteous conquests’.

And Janice Stargardt, also writing about Pagan, notes that: “Campaigns which were clearly military in character, and probably economic in purpose, were recorded as religious missions... to carry back in triumph the relics and sacred treasures of a conquered land was to justify a costly campaign whose other benefits might remain obscure to the people of the kingdom.” (1971: 52) Indeed, Pagan king Anawratha led an unsuccessful campaign against Nan Chao to secure a sacred tooth relic.

While we have no specific evidence of the motivations for the extensive forays and military expeditions by the Nan Chao across the region, it is reasonable to surmise that, like other similar kingdoms, *dhammavijaya* was an important part of it.

As we saw earlier, the Nan Chao rulers propagated a Buddhist foundation myth based around a wandering Indian monk who was allegedly an incarnation of Avalokiteśvara. There is a further myth (with variations) in which one of the sons of King Aśoka is sent to found Nan Chao/Tali. This son’s wife is an indigenous woman who also has several sons who, in turn, become the founders of the states that surround Nan Chao – itself an important insight into Nan Chao’s view of its place in the world (see Pelliot 1904: 167). It was, however, a combination of stories derived from the Buddhist archive along with a local Ngai/Ai-Lao myth that produced, according to Liang Yongchia, the potent ideological resin that seeped through the various cultures and bound them to the Nan Chao kingship. Buddhist kingship is centralising, he argues, and the king should be from the same ancestry as his subjects, a consanguine.

In the above myth, the son of Aśoka is an outsider and an affine, but in the second generation this affinal identity is conjured away, and the king’s ancestry includes both Aśoka and his subjects. Thus, outsiders become insiders. In the Ai-Lao myth, a woman called Shayi becomes pregnant after an encounter with a dragon in a stream. She gave birth to nine sons, the youngest of which would later mount

the dragon's back.⁴⁵ This boy, Kiu Long, is the legendary founder of Nan Chao.⁴⁶ The dragon as an outsider is no ordinary affine (just as the king as an outsider is no ordinary affine), and Liang argues: "The ways to incorporate the dominated people were either through marrying the indigenous women or claiming to be descendants of a marital alliance between an extraordinary outsider and an autochthonous woman." (2011: 244)

As we have seen, it was the 'outsider' southernmost chao, Mong She, that overwhelmed the other chao to form the kingdom. Therefore, there were stories about its main architect, P'i-lo-ko, as being fratricidal as well as hideous, but these are also the marks of an extraordinary being who ruptures the moral fabric and re-orientes history. Consequently, he is still remembered in a Yunnanese folk festival today. While it is questionable whether a "king should be of the same ancestry as his subjects," Liang's argument is an interesting take on how Buddhist themes were inter-laced with local mythology.

The Mong clan, who had ruled Nan Chao from its beginning, were overthrown in a coup by Pai (White) Man at the beginning of the 10th century, and annihilated. Instability followed, with several declarations of short-lived new kingdoms. But finally a Pai Man official, Tuan Ssu-p'ing, took the throne in 937 and founded a dynasty called the Tali Kingdom that would last for three centuries, until overwhelmed by the Mongol onslaught. But, it was the heir of Nan Chao: "All of these successor states governed the same basic population as had the Nan-chao kingdom. Their institutions, economy, and culture also seem to have remained basically the same..." (Backus 1981: 161) Backus stresses this continuity because of a tendency amongst Chinese authors to argue that Tali was a separate entity, thereby diminishing both the kingdom's longevity and importance.

Why was Nan Chao overtaken by a major political crisis in the early 10th century? Fitzgerald argues that it was a result of discord between "conquered Chinese populations, or populations more wholly assimilated into Chinese culture, and the more national non-Chinese elements of the old western parts of the kingdom." (1972: 57) This remark, which he makes in the context of comparing the different fates of Vietnam and Yunnan, is not very plausible given that such Chinese elements were much more significant in Vietnam,⁴⁷ yet the latter broke with the empire. Furthermore, in the three centuries of the Tali Kingdom, there was no significant shift towards a 'Chinese model'. A more plausible explanation for the crisis was the exhaustion of the *dhammavijaya* kingship.

Throughout the century before the Mong clan's downfall, they had made strenuous efforts to expand the economic base of the kingdom. While agriculture

⁴⁵ In other versions the dragon licks his back, perhaps thereby anointing him – but we will have occasion to return to this myth in a later study.

⁴⁶ Recall, his name is the alleged two extant Ai-Lao words of De Lacouperie's thesis.

⁴⁷ See the discussion in Chapter One of Taylor (2013).

was well managed and had taken advantage of new rice varieties from Southeast Asia, the trade in salt, gold, silver, tin and amber was also very important to the Nan Chao economy. Early in the 9th century, trade between China and India began to decline (Sen 2003: 150), and then the sacking of Pyu in 832 by the Nan Chao further disrupted this trade. Thus, they attempted unsuccessfully to conquer Annam (north Vietnam) between 861 and 866, and gain unimpeded access to sea trade.

Taylor seems to imagine that Nan Chao was a kingdom of pastoralists “not capable of governing the agriculturalists of An Nam” (2013: 42), but in fact they faced two main problems – one was the Sinitic structure of Annamese society by then which would need to be transformed into something more compatible with a Nan Chao state structure, and second, the Tang armies were determined to re-take Annam, ensuring that Nan Chao would not have time to complete this transformation.⁴⁸ Also, in 879, after several earlier attempts, they failed to conquer the rice bowl of Sichuan. The Tang were determined to hold onto Sichuan which, since the Chin (Qin) dynasty, had been a vital power base for any northern Chinese dynasty.

The Nan Chao had profited from the trade routes that crossed its territory and fed into the southwestern Silk Road. But to expand, they needed more than this. Fitzgerald states Nan Chao’s dilemma clearly: “To gain real strength beyond the narrow rice plains and valleys of Yunnan, separated as they are by great tracts of empty mountain country, Nanchao must occupy permanently and then fully colonise and assimilate a truly rich region of heavy population,” such as Sichuan (1972: 58). They failed to do so, and I suggest that this precipitated the Mong clan’s end. The Tali Kingdom thereafter turned inward, not unlike its Buddhist kings, and became quiescent. The edges of the kingdom, made up of many different ethnic groups brought under control by Ko-lo-feng, gradually slipped out of its grip, and by this time the Tai were on the move.

The Tai: first contacts

The Han Dynasty (221 B.C. to A.D. 220) presence in the Southwest (Yunnan) was superficial, but in the south its forces drove down through Guangdong into Guangxi and occupied Annam (northern Vietnam). They established the prefecture of Giao-chi,⁴⁹ which covered part of Guangxi and Annam, and placed it under a

⁴⁸ Taylor shows how it took the Chinese centuries to transform the original structures they found in Annam. To reverse engineer this would have also taken a long time.

⁴⁹ The spelling is variable, but this is the origin of the term ‘Kaew’ still colloquially used by Lao to refer to the Vietnamese, that has pejorative overtones. (In a similar way, China is derived from the ancient Chin (Qin) dynasty). However, Kaew no longer appears in official publications as it did under the Royal Lao Government (1947-75) because the Vietnamese are ‘comrades’ of the LPDR. People in Thailand use the ancient Cham term Yuon when similarly referring to Vietnamese.

governor. “The traditional date of 111 B.C. as the beginning of Chinese rule does not accurately reflect the continuing authority of the [Viet] Lac ruling class up to A.D. 42, a date that more properly represents the arrival of direct Chinese rule,” writes Keith Taylor (1983: 30). The fall of the Han in A.D. 220 ushered in a long period of instability on which the Nan Chao would capitalise in the 9th century.

Any weakening of Chinese rule through infighting led quickly to their loss of control, not only of predominantly Viet areas, but especially the outlying areas occupied by other ethnic groups, in particular Tai groups. Schafer (1967, 61-9) documents the disturbances and insurrections, and indicates that as early as 827, tribes from the ‘Nung Grottoes’ (i.e. Tai) had sought assistance from the Nan Chao. Or, in Ma’s account: “The Nong tribe,⁵⁰ restless and numerous, tried to engage the Nan Chao in a league against the empire, but the Emperor Y-tsong frustrated these ill-intentioned designs and himself made an alliance with the prince of Nan Chao...” (1883: 245) By this account we know that there were at least Tai emissaries in Nan Chao at this time.

Control of the trade that passed through Giao-chi must have been tempting for this inland kingdom (see Yang 2008, Ch. 2), and they kept themselves well informed of developments there, and of discontent among the minorities. In 858, preparations for the invasion of Annam began,⁵¹ part of which involved the capture of Po-chou in Guizhou in 859. In the following year, the governor of Annam led a fame-seeking expedition to recapture Po-chou. In his absence, the Nan Chao attacked and captured his capital, and by all accounts were welcomed by the indigenous peoples. No doubt, this was partly a result of having allied themselves with discontented Vietnamese in the south of Annam who marched on the capital with them (Taylor 2013: 42-3). They were driven back in 861, but they took many people with them, some presumably as slaves. In 862, they returned with a 50,000-strong army to attack Annam and parts of Guangxi, holding the region for several years until they were crushed by the famous Chinese General, Kao P’ien, at the end of 866.

Fan Ch’o, author of the *Man Shu*, was one of the Han administrators in Hanoi when it was attacked by the Nan Chao, and was wounded, just managing to escape. In fact, his report was written to inform the emperor about this barbarian kingdom. The *Man Shu* (1961: 45-6) makes it clear that exploitative Chinese administration on the frontier with the Nan Chao led to disaffection among the minorities there. The Nan Chao leaders of Che-tung (Kunming today) quickly took advantage of this by offering a daughter in marriage to a local chieftain to cement an alliance. The groups are identified only as *Ch’ung Mo Man*, and *T’ao-hua* (Peach flower) people, categories no longer recognisable, but it is clear that many of the people from that

⁵⁰ Written variably as Nong or Nung, it is in Chinese 儂人.

⁵¹ “The people of Nan-chao, whose aid had been sought by the mountain tribes of Viet-nam who had grievances against the Chinese governors to settle, came to attack Vietnamese strongholds in 858.” (Coedes, 1962: 79)

region would have been the early Tai. Backen (1981: 136) speaks of the Nan Chao army being ‘a confederation of forces,’ and Luce (1985: 102) observed: “During most of this grim period the proto-Burmans had been forced to enlist in Nan-chao armies and fight in battles, not of their own, from Ch’eng-tu to Hanoi.” As late as 862-3, from the roof of the Hanoi citadel, Fan Ch’o observed regiments of P’ao, P’u, Wang-chü and ‘two or three thousand Mang’ among the forces besieging the Chinese. There was even a regiment of the Lo-hsing ‘Naked Man’ from the P’u-t’ao region: “If any of them failed to advance or charge, the officer commanding the battle front would at once cut them down from behind.” No doubt, many Tai at this time were recruited into the Nan Chao army too, and some of them would have eventually travelled back into the Nan Chao heartland or found themselves dispersed around its frontiers.

But as far as we know, it is only with these 9th century contacts that an on-going interaction between Tai and the Nan Chao begins. Indeed, fortuitously, it was a relatively peaceful period because Taizu, the emperor of the new Song Dynasty (960–1279), declared that the Nan Chao was beyond the empire’s sphere of influence. “From then on,” writes Ma-Touan-lin, “communications became very rare and official relations with Nan-tchao were broken off.” (1883: 223) It is, therefore, fair to argue that it was probably under the umbrella of the Nan Chao kingdom that individuals, families, and indeed whole Tai villages began their movements west and southwest from Guizhou and Guangxi. The peace, however, was broken by one major rebellion by the Tai of Guangxi against the Song Dynasty, which was led by the Tai chieftain Nùng Trí Cao in 1053. This rebellion has been documented thoroughly by Anderson, who says that the Nùng clan had close contacts with Nan Chao for at least a century beforehand (2007: 75). Indeed, when Nùng Trí Cao’s forces were crushed, he sought refuge in the Tali Kingdom – although there is some controversy about his fate there.⁵² The wide-scale fighting associated with the rebellion would have caused many Tai to leave as refugees, and undoubtedly, Song reprisals would have caused people to flee to what appeared safer and more promising territory.

But the rebellion simply added impetus to the Tai migrations that had probably begun a century or more before. In writing about the expansion of the Tai into mainland Southeast Asia, Izikowitz was clearly struck by the parallels between the Mongol cavalry and the canoes of the Tai:

The *piroque* is therefore a remarkable instrument for the expansion of a people, and one can be sure that the Thaïs used it in this way... It is indeed probable that the *piroque* helped to facilitate a kind of grand invasion that took place in the 13th century at the time of the Mongol invasion of Southeast Asia by

⁵² Ma-Touan-Lin says simply that he took refuge in Tali (1883: 253), but Rocher argues, using other Chinese sources, that “Later Nung Tchi-kao offered his submission, but the king of Yunnan refused him, executed him and sent his head to the emperor.” (1899: 139)

the General Kublai Khan. The Thaïs joined with him and were recruited as mercenaries. (1981: 172)

Mercenaries is the wrong term, but clearly the Tai profited from the Mongol presence, learning techniques of warfare from them as they had probably also done from the Nan Chao armies in the past.

It now seems indisputable that the Mongol destruction of the Pagan kingdom in 1287 facilitated the rise of Tai/Shan principalities in northern Burma and Thailand, and Tatsuo Hoshino argues that some eighty years later the rise of the Lao Kingdom, Lane Xang in Luang Prabang, was a direct outcome of Mongol strategy. It is an argument worth considering, writes Martin Stuart-Fox (1998: 36), although he rightly insists that other factors were at work to ensure the rise of Tai kingdoms in the region.⁵³

Nan Chao's shadow

The ill-fated French researcher, Henri Deydier,⁵⁴ during his travels in northern Laos and southwestern China in the early 1950s researching versions of Indian epics, such as the Ramayana, discovered to his surprise that among the Tai Lue their versions had no relationship with the versions he found further south in Laos and Cambodia. He asked: "How do these northern Tay countries know about these texts, and above all what are their sources of inspiration?" (1954: 97) It was, he thought, Bengal, "the end point of the Chinese itineraries that began in Sichuan, crossing Yunnan, Upper Burma and Assam... If the Tay Lu populations have reminiscences of India and Indian texts that have no relationship with those of the Mekong valley, it is because they received them directly from Assam, Upper Burma, or the state of Manipour, a country with which the ancient kingdom of Sip Song Pan Na shared a common frontier." (1954: 97) Deydier acknowledged the importance of Nan Chao as a transit point between India and China, but its role as a transmission point for ideas from India for the populations of Yunnan and northern Laos remains out of focus. Earlier in this essay, I remarked on the importance of Sanskrit in the Nan Chao, and had Deydier been aware of this he may not have been so "absolutely surprised by the excellent pronunciation of Sanskrit" (1954: 89) that he found in these northern regions, compared with further south.

The importance of Buddhism in Nan Chao for the influence of Buddhism or Buddhist ideas in these northern areas has probably been underestimated. Some writers have hinted that Buddhism was mainly an elite activity in Nan Chao/Tali, perhaps because of the role of esoteric versions of Buddhism there. But the

⁵³ See also, Chapter 4 of Stuart-Fox, 2003.

⁵⁴ He died in a plane crash in Luang Prabang in December 1954 at the age of 32 years.

practise of a peculiarly Nan Chao form of Buddhism was widespread. It is worth noting that after the Tuan aristocracy in Tali accommodated to their new rulers, popular revolts against Mongol control were instigated and led by Buddhist monks (Rocher 1899: 151-3). Under the Ming, however, with its policy of mass Chinese migration and Sinicisation, Nan Chao Buddhism began its demise. Yet, as some Chinese authors recognise, it only “began to decline in the Qing Dynasty after a span of over a 1000 years.” (IMEC 2009: 69) By the time Fitzgerald (1941, Ch.5) studied the Minchia⁵⁵ of Tali in the 1930s, their religious practise bore a strong Chinese imprint, yet remained distinctive. This distinctiveness was underwritten by indigenous territorial spirits, the Benzhu, of which one the most widespread and popular is the Great Black God, apparently of Indian origin (IMEC 2009: 175).

A later colleague of Deydier from the *Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient*, François Bizot, found himself confronted with pre-Theravada ‘archaisms’ during research among the Tai Lue in northern Laos, and which he recognised were relevant to Burma and southwestern China too. “In this large country... survive [Buddhist] followers who speak Mon-Khmer (Plang, Ta-ang, smaller groups like Wa, etc), whose adherence to Buddhism was perhaps earlier than that of the Taïs who now surround them (Leu, Kheun, Taïs Neua, etc.), that is before the 14th century. The contribution of these long-lost communities resides above all in the type of ordination that they continue up to now. This retains numerous archaisms that clearly precede Sinhalisation...” (Bizot 2000: 512) Bizot does not consider the possible anterior influence of Nan Chao/Tali Buddhism, but we know that the Buddhist adherents of this kingdom were not Tai, and we can speculate that they most likely did perpetuate many practises at a local level long after Nan Chao/Tali Buddhism had been overwhelmed by Chinese practises.

J. George Scott many years ago remarked upon the fact that there was evidence that the Lahu of northern Burma had once been Buddhists, “but the Lahu are now broken up into small settlements and their ideas may have shrunk with their surroundings.” (1911: 926)⁵⁶ It suggests that there is no reason to accept at face value the claims of Theravada Buddhist states that they introduced Buddhism among groups found in the highlands. As Leslie Milne’s (2004[1924]) study of the Palaung shows, the Burmese claimed to have introduced Buddhism to them in 1782, but as she points out, it is plausible that they encountered Buddhism one or two centuries beforehand (2004: 312), and I would suggest perhaps even well before that. Jim Scott’s thesis about upland people fleeing lowland Buddhist

⁵⁵ Known under the PRC as the Bai ethnic group, 白族, and not to be confused with what we have referred to as the Pai Man, although their ancestors clearly made up a part of that ancient general category.

⁵⁶ Michael Blackmore’s (1961) interesting early article on the ‘ethnology’ of Nan Chao points to continuing contemporary traditions among the Lolo dating from the Nan Chao period.

states which despise them is probably misleading in many cases, as these peoples may in fact be the remnants of the Buddhist Kingdoms of Nan Chao/Tali. Indeed, Melford Spiro has pointed out how “Esoteric Buddhism... is deeply involved in the indigenous Burmese spirit (*nat*) religion. *Nat* images are as prominent as Buddha images in the shrines of esoteric sects.” (1970: 186)⁵⁷ Esoteric Buddhism, as we have noted, was pre-eminent in Nan Chao/Tali.

Finally, we can see the influence of Nan Chao/Tali in legends and their transformation across Yunnan and northern Indochina. Not only did they adopt and propagate an Ai-Lao legend, to which we have referred above, but as Pelliot (1904: 167-9) noticed, this also was soon given a Buddhist gloss. The legend, or variants of it, can be found across this region – and perhaps even provides the mytho-logic that animates the Lao legend of Khun Borom.

To investigate these possible long *durée* influences of the Nan Chao/Tali Kingdom may seem like chasing shadows, but ghosts have been known to become gods.

Conclusion

These days, the origins of the Thai/Tai/Lao appear to excite relatively little interest among foreign researchers who blithely consider the question closed, but it remains an issue of lively interest in the region, especially among the Lao; and I have pointed out the obvious attractions of the Ai-Lao thesis for them. The by-passing of the origins debate by foreigners, especially since the 1990s, has simply left the field wide open for further speculation. So, in the opening pages I have tried to make clear at greater length than others what is wrong with the thesis that the Ai-Lao and the Nan Chao were Tai. Along the way, it has allowed us not only to view some problems with traditional historiography of the region, but also to note some possible real effects of the Nan Chao/Tali kingdom on the peoples around them.

Many years ago, Edmund Leach observed that “Nanchao, despite its remote position, was unquestionably a state of Indian rather than Chinese type” (2000 [1961]: 230), placing it clearly within the ancient states of mainland Southeast Asia.⁵⁸ David Wyatt, introducing his history of Thailand, writes: “For several centuries, Nan Zhao was a major power in the affairs of northern Southeast Asia... it was the first major regime to become involved in the interior uplands of mainland Southeast Asia, that is, the regions that are now the Shan states of Burma, northern Thailand and Laos, and northwestern Vietnam,” (2003: 12-13). But Wyatt’s short, perceptive section on the Nan Chao has been easily skipped over.

⁵⁷ He adds, without seeming to realise its implications, that some of these beliefs “would seem to be much more at home on the Himalayan slopes than in the Irrawaddy valley.” (Spiro 1970: 187)

⁵⁸ Perhaps one should also note that Leach at this time still held the common opinion that Nan Chao was Tai.

The Nan Chao/Tali kingdom was a variant of the ancient states of mainland Southeast Asia, yet it has never been properly accorded that status because of the cognitive barrier that was thrown up by the political barrier of Yunnan's absorption into the Chinese empire after the 13th century. It is not, for example, recognised as an ancient state of Southeast Asia in *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia* (Tarling, 1992), although Sinitic Vietnam is. There are, in my view, several good reasons for recognising the historical importance of Nan Chao for mainland Southeast Asia, and not just because it facilitated Tai expansion. It was a major Buddhist Kingdom, although not a Theravada Buddhist one, and one might suggest that the consolidation of the latter in lower mainland Southeast Asia from the 15th century onwards also helped to screen off Nan Chao's significance for the region as a whole. It was an important player in regional trade and exchange, its destruction of the Pyu Kingdom paved the way for the rise of Pagan, and its invasion of Annam weakened the hold of the northern dynasties there.

Because most modern researchers of the Nan Chao/Tali Kingdom have been Sinologists they have been inclined to compare developments in the Kingdom with those in China proper even when they see, as with Yang (2008) for example, that Yunnan at the time had much in common with Southeast Asia. On the other hand, Thai and Lao researchers have remained largely ignorant of the Chinese sources. Winai (2002: 52) at the end of his paper emphasises the importance of these sources and encourages greater scholarly collaboration.⁵⁹

One aim of this essay has been to emphasise the Southeast Asian features of the Nan Chao/Tali Kingdom, while recognising the important influences from both China and Tibet. Hopefully researchers familiar with the early kingdoms of Southeast Asia will in the future cast a careful eye over these northern kingdoms and, either singly or in collaboration, further contribute to re-orienting our perspective.

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⁵⁹ The exemplary collaboration between Foon Ming Liew-Herres, Volker Grabowsky and Renoo Wichasin (2012) should be noted here.

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