

The ambiguous use of the term *Phu Tai*: a specific ethnic group or a Tai-person in general.

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There is probably no other Tai group, about which there is so much confusion about its ethnonym and history as the ethnic Phutai of the mid-Mekong¹ - often being mistaken with distantly related Tai groups of northern Vietnam and southern China.

The term Phutai is often attached to other ethnic groups than the Phutai of the Mid-Mekong. In the *SW-Tai*² branch of the Tai-Kadai language stock the Tai Dam, Tai Khao and the Tai Daeng of NW-Vietnam have been referred to as Phutai Dam, Phutai Khao, and Phutai Daeng. In the *Central-Tai* branch the various Budai³ groups of Yunnan and Guangxi, China, have been subject to insinuation of being identical to or closely related to the Phutai of the Mid-Mekong. This inconsistent use of the ethnonym Phutai has caused confusion among scholars⁴, the general public and the Phutais themselves, and this article focuses on the ambiguous⁵ meaning of the term *phu-tai*.

The first meaning of *phu-tai*⁶ refers to a specific ethnic group and is apparently used among different Tai groups in two different regions: 1. The Phutai of the Mid-Mekong (NE-

¹ Mainly in the provinces of Mukdahan, Kalasin, Sakon Nakhon and Nakhon Phanom of Thailand and Savannakhet and Khammouane of Laos P.D.R. Several scholars have suggested the existence of Phutai in adjacent Nghe An province of mid-Vietnam, but this has not been confirmed by field studies.

² Li Fang Kuei, 1977, splits the Tai-Kadai language stock into the three groups: The South-western Tai Group, the Central Tai Group, and the Northern Tai Group). See also Johnson, 2010, pgs. 7-9

³ Pranee and Theraphan, 1998, page 280 and 291: “Pu Dai”, “Pu Tai (Budai)”. Mingfu & Johnson, 2008, page 14: “Bu Dai (Pu Dai)”. Eric Johnson, private communication: “phu²² tai³³”. Johnson, 2010, page 16: “... the Taic word *pu/phu/bu* still used to this day by most Zhuang groups, meaning “tribe, people, person, ethnic group.” and on page 19 Johnson informs, that one of the major ethnic subgroups in Wenshan Prefecture, Yunnan, is the: “pu Dai”, in IPA: “phu⁵⁵ daai³¹, phu²² taai³¹” and that other “exonyms and autononyms used in some areas: Tulao (土僚、土老), Tuzu (土族), Pulao (濮僚; ancient ethnonym)”. In his work Johnson hereafter uses Dai Zhuang for the *pu Dai* language and ethnicity. Note that only Dai is written with capital letter, *pu* being a classifier for “group/people”.

⁴ Even a respected institution as Ethnologue (SIL-International) erroneously informs about 209.000 Phu Thai speakers residing in N-Vietnam confusing the Phutai with the Tai Dam, Tai Khao and Tai Daeng.

⁵ Chamberlain, 1983: “the term Phu Tai is to some extent an ambiguous one, since freely translated it means simply “Tai Person” and a great many Tai speakers refer to themselves in this way, including the Black Tai, White Tai, Red Tai, etc. However there is a large population of Tai Speakers known only as Phu Tai. They are to be found today in Savannakhet, Khammouane, Nakhon Phanom, Sakon Nakhon, and Kalasin.”

⁶ Phutai is in Thailand written in various ways with various meanings. The majority of the Phutai in Thailand use ภูไท, meaning “mountain-Tai”. This form was introduced by a famous non-Phutai monk, Uan Titso (อ้วน ทิสโส) in 1926: ภู

Thailand and Mid-Laos), 2. The various Budai (bu Dai, pu Tai) of the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands. The ethnonym shares in both regions an identical meaning, “phu/bu/pu”: “tribe, people, person, ethnic group”, thus Phutai/Budai simply means “Tai person / Tai group”; but the language, beliefs, religion etc. of the Phutai and Budai is very different.

The Budai in Wenshan district, southern Yunnan, were first described by the American missionary Dodd in 1923⁷. In the 1990s two prominent Thai linguists, Pranee Kullavanijaya and Theraphan L-Thongkum, performed a 3-year field-research project in Laos, Vietnam and China and with Dodd in mind they compared the Phutai of the Mid-Mekong with the Budai of Yunnan and concluded, that they are two different ethnic groups⁸. Also Erik Johnson has conducted linguistic research in Wenshan⁹ and suggests that the Phutai and the Budai have a time-split in the order of app. 1.200 years¹⁰. Another Tai group who also refer to themselves as “Tai group” is the Po Tai¹¹ in Jinlong, Longzhou, Chongzou, Guangxi, who are related to the Tay of the Central-Tai branch of the Tai-Kadai in nearby N-Vietnam.

The second meaning of *phu-tai* is a grammatical feature of most Tai languages. The prefix *phu* means “person, tribe, people, ethnic group”, thus *Phutai Dam* means “Taidam person” or “Taidam group” and should correctly be written *phu Taidam* - only the ethnonym with capital letter. Another word with similar meaning is *khon*, which can be used as a substitute, when referring to for example *khon Taidam*: “Tai Dam people”.

If a Tai from *Sipsong Chu Tai* in NW-Vietnam is asked: “Are you a *phu Tai*?” then the answer will most likely be: “yes, I am a *phu Tai*” - meaning “yes, I am a *Tai person*” or short “yes, I am Tai” (not Vietnamese), *phu* being understood as “person, human, group” etc.

During a Phutai field research in Xepon district, Laos P.D.R, we met a woman in the market, who spoke a dialect, which we did not recognize, and when we asked her: “Are you Phutai”, she answered: “Yes”. When we furthermore asked: “Are you a Phutai from Xepon?”, she answered: “no, I am a Tai Daeng, who moved from Houa Phan province to marry a Phutai from here”, and she explained, that her native Tai Daeng language was quite

ไทย. The official writing in Thailand is ไทย (written with a final “ย”) and used in the Royal Thai Dictionary, where ไทย is explained as meaning “free”. This form dates back to *Prachum Phongsawadan 4* (“the 4th Meeting about Chronicles”) from 1915. The Phutai in Laos P.D.R. exclusively use ຜູ້ໄທ (ຜູ້ໄທ) meaning “human/group-Tai”. This form is also used in most modern publications - including this article - in order not to confuse the ethnonym with the national name of Thailand: *Prathet Thai* (ประเทศไทย). For the same reason many scholars do not use transcriptions as Phuthai or Phu Thai, even linguistically being the correct form. The ambiguity dates back to the end of the 19th century (the Pavie Mission) and to the mid of the 19th century (the Mekong Mission), when the French explorers indiscriminately used forms as *Pou Thai* for all Tai groups met with in the Lao-Vietnam border mountains from Cambodia to China, and had “a lot of esteem for the straightness of the mountain Lao”. (Malglaive, 2000, p. 65)

For Phutai language, see Chaiyasuk and Mollerup, 2013 (in Thai).

⁷ Dodd, 1923, p. 155: “Pu Tai”

⁸ Pranee and Theraphan, 1998, page 291: “The conclusion that Pu Tai (Budai) and Pu Tai (Phu Thai) are of different ethnic groups ...”

⁹ Johnson, 2010 and Mingfu and Johnson, 2008.

¹⁰ Johnson, personal communication

¹¹ Suwatthana, 1998, page 98.

different from Phutai and that the Tai Daeng were not Buddhist; but animist (spirit worshipping). In her daily life in Mid-Laos she never spoke her native language, because the local Phutai did not understand Tai Daeng.

We have experienced a similar ambiguous use of “phu-Tai”, when visiting ethnic Tai Dam in Xieang Khouang in northern Laos, and know that other researchers have been confused as well, when interviewing Tai Don (Khao), Tai Dam and Lao Noi¹² of NW-Vietnam.

This ambiguous and confusing use of Phutai (as a specific ethnic group) and “phu-Tai” (as a Tai person in general) has led many writers to misunderstand that the Phutai of the Mid-Mekong belong to the same ethnic group as - or are genetically closely related - to the Tai groups of northern Vietnam and southern China. Some writers even postulate a Phutai migration from NE-Vietnam to mid-Laos only a few centuries ago. We disagree for several reasons: 1) The Tai Dam, Tai Khao and Tai Daeng have all had their own indigenous scripts for more than half a millennium; whereas the Phutai have no script of its own. 2) None of the Tai languages of NE-Vietnam are mutually intelligible with Phutai, and 3) other ethnic markers as religion, beliefs, customs, architecture, and dressing, are different as well.

Even Phutai forms a linguistic continuum of Tai Dam, Tai Khao, Tai Daeng and other *Mountain-Tai* languages, then Phutai is not mutually intelligible with any of these languages; the vocabulary and tonal systems being too different.

Phutai language is closely related to and mutually intelligible with Phuan and Nyo¹³. When a Phuan speaker asks *pai ka-loe* - meaning “where are you going?” - a Phutai will ask *pai si-loe*¹⁴. The letter *sara-ai-mai-muan* (ຳ) is in Phutai and Phuan pronounced as *oe*; in contrast to Thai and Lao, where the pronunciation is *ai*. Also: where the Phuan have diphthongs, the Phutai have lost them: Phuan *nuea* - for “meat” - is in Phutai *noe*. Finally: Where Lao and Thai speakers will say *khaen* for ‘arm’; Phutai and Phuan say *haen* (*kh* → *h*).

We have experience with Tai Nyo from our home-area in the Phu Phan mountains of NE-Thailand, Thanyalak being a native Phutai. When doing field research on Phuan language in N-Laos the conversation was in Phutai and Phuan, but when visiting neighboring Tai Daeng and Tai Dam villages, the conversation was held in Lao.

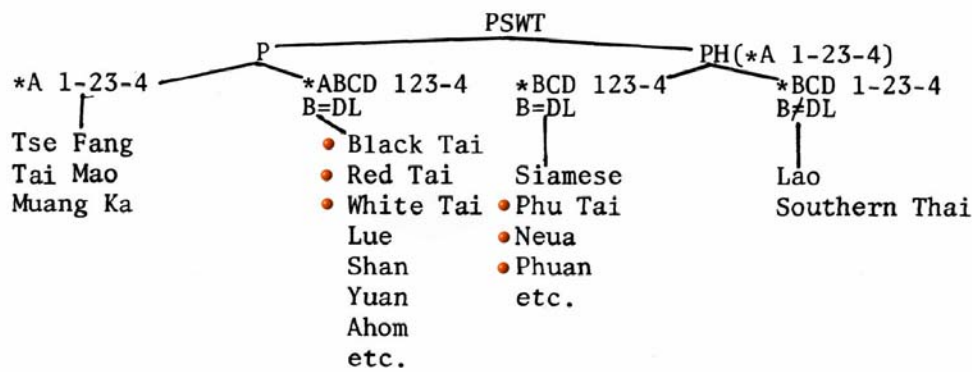
James R. Chamberlain, splits the Tai languages of the Southwestern Tai group into two groups based on the pronunciation of initial consonants: 1) Un-aspirated consonants (the P-group: /k t p/) and 2) aspirated consonants (the PH-group /kh th ph/). Phutai, Phuan, Nyo, Lao and Thai of the Mekong watershed all belong to the PH-group, whereas the Tai Dam, Tai Khao, and Tai Daeng belong to the P-group.¹⁵

¹² The ethnic Lao Noi forms one of several ethnic Lao groups in NW-Vietnam (see Howard, 2002). The authors interviewed a Lao Noi, who was presented as a “Phutai” (sic.) at the 2nd International Phutai Festival in Khao Wong, Kalasin, Thailand in 2013. Her dressing and language indicated that the Lao Noi migrated from Houa Phan in N-Laos to the Dien Bien Phu area of NW-Vietnam, a distance of app. 100 km. Vietnamese sources have proposed the migration to have taken place app. 300 years ago, but could as well have been caused by the Ho terror app. 150 years ago.

¹³ Chamberlain, 1975, page 63, includes Phutai, Phuan, Nyo, Tai Xam Nuea in an *Old Nuea subgroup*.

¹⁴ English: Where are you going? Phutai: /pai¹ si⁶-lɤ²/? ໂປໂສໂເອ (ໂປໂສໂໂ)? Phuan: /pai² ka³-lɤ³/? ໂປໂກະເອ? (ໂປໂກະໂໂ) Thai: ໂປໂໂທນ? /pai² nai¹/? Lao: ໂປໂໂສ /pai¹ sai¹/?

¹⁵ Chamberlain, 1975, page 50

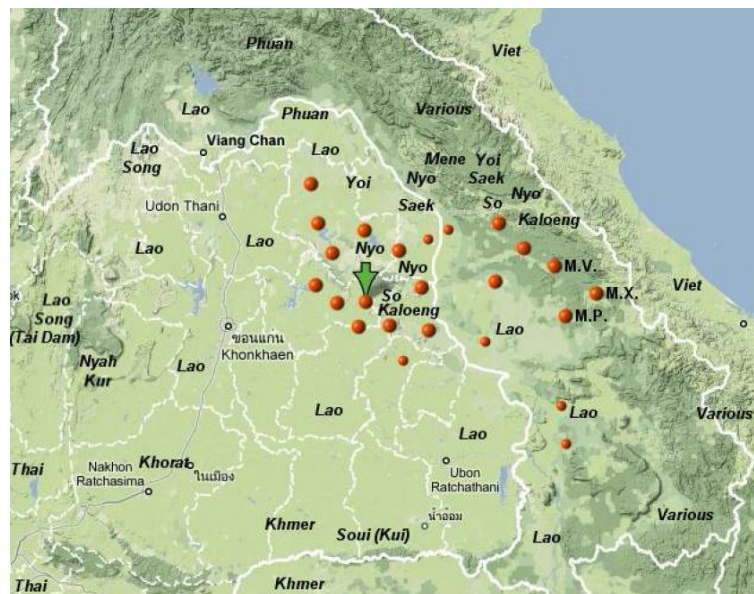


Chamberlain, 1975, p. 50.

Another linguist, Oraphan Bowonraksa (1998) has compared the Phutai language of Kalasin, Thailand, with the Lao Song (Tai Dam), who were relocated by Siamese forces from the Tai Dam area of Dien Bien Phu to Phetchaburi and other provinces of modern central Thailand in 1779, and informs that Phutai and Lao Song are two different languages.



- 1: Eastern Isan
 - 2: Mueang Vang
 - 3: Mueang Phuan or Xieang Khouang, N-Laos
 - 4: Houa Phan - Sam Nuea, N-Laos
 - 5: Mueang Thaen, now Dien Bien Phu, N-Vietnam.
 - 6: The proto Tai-Kadai area of Guangxi and Guizhou provinces, southern China.
 - 7: Wenshan, Yunnan
- Arrows: Tentative indications of approximate migration routes¹⁶



Above: Distribution of languages in NE-Thailand and mid-Laos.

The red circles depicts the main habitats of the Phutai.

The Phutai of Laos P.D.R. mostly live in the eastern parts of the provinces of Savannakhet and Khammouane. Mueang Vang (MV), Mueang Phin (MP), and Mueang Xepon (MX) are ancient Phutai settlements, from where the Phutai and other ethnic groups were relocated to west of the Mekong app. 180 years ago.

The Phutai of NE-Thailand (Isan) live in the vicinity of the Phu Phan mountain chain with the Phutai Khao Wong residing as depicted by the green arrow south of the mountains.

Maps: Chaiyasuk and Mollerup

¹⁶ The Tai migrations are complex and the indications on this map are only tentative. No linguists or historians have proven exact migration routes. Edmonson (1996 and 1998) has suggested a “language corridor” passing Wenshan to Yunnan and N-Vietnam and N- Laos. “Na Noi Oi Nu” is based on legends generally assumed to have been located in *Mueang Thaen*, Dien Bien Phu, NW-Vietnam, but some researchers point at a more easterly location.

Phutai language is only spoken in the hinterlands of the Mekong River in NE-Thailand (Isan) and adjacent Mid-Laos, from where the Phutai were relocated by Siamese troops app. 180 years ago. The language belongs like the neighboring Lao, Nyo, Saek, Thai, Phuan etc. to the Tai-Kadai language stock, which comprises of nearly 100 languages and counts nearly 100 million speakers¹⁷. The cradle of the Tai-Kadai languages is generally believed to have been in southern China app. 3000 years ago. The Huashan rock-paintings¹⁸ in Guangxi province, southern China, were most likely executed by the ancestors of the Tai app. 2.200-2.400 years ago, who formed some of the *Bai-yue* (百越) (“Hundred Yue”) or *Bai-phu* (百濮) groups (“Hundred Tribes”). The app. 2000 years old Dong Son drums can most likely be credited to these proto Tai groups. In present times the Tai-Kadai languages can be found from southern China to northern Cambodia, southern Thailand and as far west as Assam, eastern India, being the national languages of present day Thailand and Laos P.D.R.

The Phutai probably migrated from somewhere in *Sipsong Chu Tai* in NW-Vietnam to the Khamkoet area on the Nakai plateau in Mid-Laos approximately a millennium ago¹⁹ coinciding with the assumed era of the Khun Borom the legendary progenitor of the Tai-speaking peoples, installed by the heavenly Phya Thaen²⁰. Only during the decline of the Khmer Empire the Phutai could have continued their migration and settled south of the Nakai plateau in the area of the legendary Mueang Vang in eastern Savannakhet.

The existence of Tai groups in Dien Bien Phu, who refer to themselves as “phu-Tai”, has not gone unnoticed in the Phutai communities of NE-Thailand, who together with the Lao, Thai, Phuan etc. share the legend of having an origin in Mueang Thaen, NW-Vietnam.

At the 2nd International Phutai Festival in Khao Wong, Kalasin, Thailand, the local Phutai audience was presented for slogans like: “We are all Phu Tai Dam”. After having listened to songs of the Tai Dam, Tai Khao, Tai Daeng, and Lao Noi, whom the organizers had invited from Dien Bien Phu, one local boy asked the authors: “How can the Phu Tai Dam from Vietnam be Phutai like me, when I do not understand their songs; but I do understand the songs of the Phutai from Laos?” Being reminded about the *Emperor's New Clothes*, we answered with a smile: “They are not Phutai like us; they are our Tai cousins from Vietnam, with whom we have common ancestors. Our common roots date back in time more than a millennium. We only find Phutai speaking our language and sharing our culture here in Isan and in Laos”

¹⁷ Chaiyasuk and Mollerup, 2013.

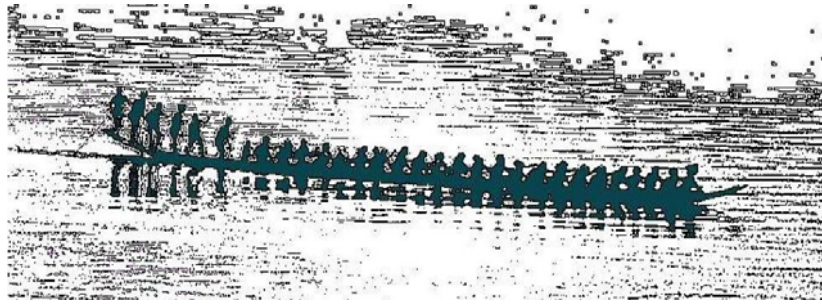
¹⁸ Qian, 2013. page 26. On our map located at “6”.

¹⁹ ... “we might conclude that the Tai began migrating westwards and southwestwards” ... “in the eight century, and that during the 11th, 12th, and 13th centuries they found their way approximately to their present homes in Southeast Asia”

Chamberlain, 1975, p. 58.

²⁰ Phongsawadan 1, the *Lan Xang Chronicle*, p. 293, is an often quoted source in Thailand for this creation myth, which is shared by many different SW-Tai groups. It was compiled in 1916, based on interviews conducted by military officers in N-Vietnam in the 1880s. Souneth Phothisane, 1996, has in his work compared some 30 versions of the Borom myth (Bulom in Lao) and attributes the oldest version at 1422, originating in Xieang Khuang. Michel Lorrillard, 1999, dates the oldest to the end of the same century, originating in Luang Prabang. In both cases in N-Laos south of Dien Bien Phu, formerly Mueang Thaen, where Khun Borom is believed to have ruled the first humans in *Na Noi Oi Nu*., a place of unknown location. We have no mention of *Na Noi Oi Nu* from chronicles written in Tai Dam or Tai Khao script.

But behind the smile we hid a rising concern about how the new Phutai generations will conceive their ethnic identity. Where are the Phutai of the Mekong heading?



Above: Rock-paintings of Huashan, Guangxi, China.



Right: Dong Son drum exhibited in Savannakhet Museum, Laos. Eventually cast in the Xepon gold-mine area of eastern Savannakhet.



Above: The author interviewing an elder local Phutai speaker of Ban Lahanam, Savannakhet, Laos P.D.R.



Right: The author interviewing an ethnic Lao Noi, presented as a 'Phutai' (sic!) at the International Phutai Festival in Khao Wong, Kalasin, Thailand, 2013.



Dong Son drum exhibited in Savannakhet Museum, Laos.

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