

Research Title	Tai and Chung in Yunnan Province: The Analysis from Fieldwork
Researchers	Sumitr Pitiphat Samerchai Poolsuwan
Year	2000

### **ABSTRACT**

This report presents the ethnological findings of a field investigation of several “Chuang” and “Tai” groups scattered throughout Yunnan province’s southeast districts of Wenshan, Qiubei, Guangnan and Yuangyang , conducted in January,1999. The subdivisions of the “Chuang” that are the subject of this investigation are the “Pu-nung”, “Pu-tai” and “Pu-yai”. Those of the “Tai” are the “Tai-yeo”, “Tai-lo” and “Tai-aulie”. Both groups, “Chuang” and “Tai”, speak a dialect that linguists classify as belonging to the “Tai language family”. Both, moreover, are “Tai” in maintaining the customs of their ancestors more faithfully than the ethnic Tai (known as “Chuang”) in Kwangsi province; the latter receiving more of a cultural shading from China, especially apparent since the Ming dynasty (1368-1644 A.D.).

We discern many common characteristics uniting the cultural beliefs of the Tai speaking ethnic groups, especially those concerning creation stories, marriage customs, patterns of governance, core religious beliefs, and ceremonial practices. Although the cultural characteristics of the individual groups might deviate in some details from each others, in their basic outline these traits reflect membership in a common cultural family. Finally, the array of cultural characteristics mentioned above serves as a benchmark to distinguish the “Tai-Kadai” culture from the contemporary Chinese cultural tradition.

Mainstream Chinese culture has unfolded from its birthplace in the Yellow River Basin uninterruptedly from circa a thousand year B.C., and owing to the Chinese court’s practice of keeping written historical records since its origins, we are furnished with an excellent tool for inquiry into Chinese cultural customs from their ancient origin through their evolution to present form.

We delineate some key original elements of the 3000-year-old Yellow River Basin – centered Chinese cultural tradition, especially with respect to religious beliefs and political organization, which has been changed dramatically during subsequent periods, are similar to those of the “Tai-Kadai” now residing in the South of China.

The theory we advance for the similarities (especially in religious beliefs, as well as in some other facets of culture) we find between the ancient original forms of the 3000-year-old Yellow River Valley-centered Chinese culture and those of the original “Tai-Kadai”, is that both branched out from a common cultural root in the Yellow River Valley before (in the case of “Tai-Kadai”) migrating down into the South of China. It was the Chinese society that underwent faster change in the direction of greater complexity compared to that of the more geographically remote and socially “primitive” “Tai-Kadai” who, owing to that, persisted with a cultural influence from the Han Dynasty (beginning Christian era) that have maintained this ancient original culture best. Notwithstanding the geographical remoteness from the cradle of ancient Chinese culture in the Yellow River Valley, we want to point out that historical evidence and field data are able to support the contention (most starkly evident in the dimensions we make mention of ) that Tai-Kadai culture had its origin near the Yellow River Valley some 3000 years ago. We theorize that the Yueh, who are mentioned in ancient Chinese historical accounts, are the ancestors to the Tai-Kadai groups residing today in southwest China. The Yueh culture originated in the area near the mouth of the Yangtze River in Central China; and was influenced in its political organization and culture by the early Chou Dynasty, centered in the Yellow River Valley 3000 years ago. The Yueh started a gradual southward migration beginning in the third century before Christ. This ethnic grouping established a separate independent kingdom 200 years before Christ, centered in Nan-yueh in the vicinity to the mouth of Hsi River in Southern China. This independent kingdom lasted only briefly (about 100 years) before annexed to the Greater Chinese Kingdom (early Han Dynasty).

The ancient cultural traits common to the indigenous peoples scattered throughout Southern China are the self-same traits that emerged in their starkest form in our investigation of the Tai-Kadai, and may well be the cultural residue (hold-overs) from the original “Yueh” people. These traits are as follows:

1. Belief that the body is inhabited by a dualistic spirit; so that when a patriarch dies, one part of the spirit ascends to heaven, while the other remains to become an “ancestral spirit” which protects the welfare of surviving relatives. The ritual concerning delivering the portion of the spirit skyward is very complicated and requires a ceremony conducted by an expert practitioner. Subordinate family member’s spirit might be left to wander destinationless owing to the complexity and expense of performing the corresponding ceremony.

2. The practitioner who have the ability to intermediate between the world of the dead (spirit world) and of the living are the “Mod” and “Mo”. “Mod” are usually female and have special indwelling and “gifted” powers that make themselves known in “trance” or episodes of pseudo, or even authentic, illness-symptoms. “Mo” who are always male, depend on mastery in reciting formulae and performing ceremonies-knowledge to plan taught by gurus-to access the spirit world. Elevation to “mod” status is not tied to any particular, or particularly elevated, social status; all that is required is that person be possessed by the spirit. “Mo” on the other hand, are delimited to lineages tracing their roots to the community’s leading clans.

3. For ruling circles, clan or family descent is very important, as it is through particular clan or family membership that eligibility to rule accrues, as well as claims to property ownership. For ordinary people family genealogy and clan consanguinity, because it could not be used to claim any privilege, was sometimes not traced, or was eventually forgotten as unimportant.

4. As in the old feudal system, land was the common property of ruling clans or families, who in turn would allot it to commoners (the landless or “Prai”) to cultivate or exploit for their own purposes in exchange for a share of the proceeds and some labor service.

While deviating from each other in minor detail, tribe to tribe, the cultural patterns we describe discernibly reflect membership in a common cultural complex. And it is interesting that this common cultural structure corresponds to the early Chinese cultural complex (Chou Dynasty) that arose in the Yellow River Valley some 3000 years ago. This correspondence supports the contention, also born out by our field studies, as well as evidence to be found in Chinese historical texts, that particularly the Yueh, ancestors of modern-day “Tai-Kadai”, bear an especially close cultural resemblance to the Chinese centered in the Yellow River Basin.

Research Title	Tai Muong and Tai Thanh in Muong Qua, Vietnam
Researchers	Sumitr Pitiphat Huong Luang
Year	2000

### **ABSTRACT**

This report presents the ethnological findings of a field investigation of Tai Muong and Tai Thanh groups who live in the original Tai community called “Muong Qua”. The community is situated in the present village of Mon Son, Con Cuong District, Nghe An Province in the north-western part of Vietnam, not far from the Lao border towards Chiang Kwang. The area has been a Tai settlement from time immemorial. The Muong spoke the Viet-Muong language. Politically, the community was traditionally organized into villages or ban (headed by toom ban) and towns or muong (headed by chao muong). Many ban formed a muong. The organization was similar to the traditional Thai and Lao political structure. However, such organization underwent certain changes at the beginning of the nineteenth century when the area came under the Vietnamese influence during the Nguyen Dynasty. The Vietnamese form of local administration was adopted. Nevertheless, it was the Tai who remained local rulers even after Vietnam was colonized by France towards the end of the nineteenth century. In 1954 when France was defeated, Vietnam abolished the traditional form of government altogether, thus also putting an end to the long tradition of Tai local autonomy.

The Tai who have lived in various districts in Nghe An are called “Tai Muong”. During the past one hundred years or so, there was another group of Tai who migrated from Thanh Hoa into Nghe An and came under the Tai Muong administration. In such circumstances, they were obliged to offer their service to the Tai Muong, e.g. farming, building and repairing houses, and doing other manual work for the community. They were called by the Tai Muong inhabitants “Man Thanh” which means the barbarians from Thanh Hoa. The name was subsequently changed to Tai Thanh in an effort to minimize the prejudicial attitude of the local inhabitants in line with the modern Vietnamese policy.

Tai Muong and Tai Thanh are ethnological groups who speak the Tai language family and share a common cultural heritage. However, after several hundred years of separation, they evolved their own identities in such a way that each appears ethnologically distinct from the

other. This research attempts to compare the similarities and differences between Tai Muong and Tai Thanh in Muong Qua, paying attention to such matters as housing characteristics, costumes, systems of kinship, beliefs, ceremonies related to life cycle, cosmology, folklore, etc. It also describes their living conditions, economic system and governments, as well as other social and political transformations that have taken place in Muong Qua up to the present time.

Research Title	The Tay and Lachi in Northern Vietnam
Researchers	Sumitr Pitiphat Samerchai Poolsuwan Pichet Saiphan
Year	2001

### **ABSTRACT**

This report consists of two parts. The first part presents the ethnological findings of a field investigation, conducted in March-April, 2000, of two ethnic groups of the Tai-Kadai language family in northern Vietnam, the Tay and Lachi, in terms of their former administration, housing characteristics, costumes, economic system, family and kinship, religious beliefs, and life-cycle ceremonies. The Tay belong to the Tai-speaking peoples who are scattered along the east bank of the Red River from time immemorial while the Lachi are a group of the Kadai-speaking peoples who migrated from the South of China a few hundred years ago.

In the second part we discuss the beliefs and rites of the Tay compared with those of the Thai. Tay and Thai are two major ethnic groups who speak languages of the Tai family and share a common cultural heritage. However, after several hundred years of separation, they evolved their own identities in such a way that each appears ethnologically distinct from the other. The Thai formed a federal state of twelve principalities or "Sipsong Chu Tai" and have their own scripts. The Tay neither developed such a complicated government system nor their own alphabets. For writing purposes, they borrowed Chinese characters.

In terms of beliefs, the two ethnic groups receive more or less cultural shading from their neighbors. Residing on the west bank of the Red River near Laos, the Thai accept Lan Cheuang as their tribal hero. The Tay settlement area is close to China, thus enabling the combination of the original Tai culture with the ancient Chinese culture of the Yellow River Basin. For instance, the Tay worship ancestral spirits with the 'Mod' (sorcerer) and 'Mo' (priest) as the practitioner who intermediates between the world of the dead and of the living. Another example is the concept of land as the common property of ruling families who have a clan chief who allots land to the commoners and performs rituals for the community.

Research Title	Tai Communities in the Shan State and Khamti Luong
Researchers	Sumitr Pitiphat Paritta Koanantakul Samerchai Poolsuwan Wilaiwan Kanittanan
Year	2002

## ABSTRACT

This report presents the ethnological findings of several Tai groups in Myanmar in terms of their social and cultural customs from their ancient origin through present for inquiry into their social and cultural evolution. In the first part we study Tai communities in two townships, Maymyo, a subdivision in Mandalay which was founded during the British colonial period, and Yaungshwe, an ancient capital of Shan States where the Tai have been living for centuries both inland and in Inle Lake. Emphasis is placed on their social and cultural customs, their ethnicity, and their relationships with other peoples living nearby.

In the second part we study the Tai in Khamti Luong (Putao) in Kachin State along the Myanmar-Assam (India) border, in terms of their social organization and systems of kinship, as they relate to their social evolution in the past, their ethnicity, and their social and cultural customs, past and present. Data were collected by interviewing local informants and close observation. Linguistic notes on the meaning of “Khamti Luong” and functions of Tai Khamti language within their social context are presented at the end of the report.

Research Title	Religion and Beliefs of the Black Tai in Sipsong Chu Tai, Vietnam
Researcher	Sumitr Pitiphat
Year	2002

### **ABSTRACT**

This research report is based on data from interviews with knowledgeable Black Tai people and observations of their rituals and ceremonies during several field trips to the old territory of Sipsong Chu Tai which today includes many large towns such as Muong Thanh, Muong Lo, Muong La, Muong Than, and Muong Kwai. Because of the geography of Sipsong Chu Tai which is set in isolated and twisting narrow valleys amidst a jumble of high mountain chains, the Black Tai have managed to preserve at least a semblance of their ancient cultural patterns. Their basic beliefs remain animist. They are familiar with the spirits of the sky, *kwan*, and other spirits related to cosmology and magic. They also respect certain plants and animals related to ancestor spirits and totemism. Such beliefs have disappeared from the traditions of the Tai groups who have adopted Buddhism. Today Buddhist Tai groups live especially in Thailand, Laos, Burma and certain regions of Yunnan. Yet even these Buddhist groups retain remnants of the belief system seen more clearly among the Black Tai.

The researcher collected data about the sorts of beliefs in Black Tai homes and communities. This report also contains an analysis of the structure and function of these beliefs in the context of economics, politics, social organization and cultural ecology.

After the political change in Vietnam into a socialist system in 1954, after the French colonialist period, the central government of Vietnam formulated restrictive policies to control local politics and all activities of the minority groups. The Black Tai were forbidden to perform religious activities at village and city (or muong) level. But the essential rituals concerned with family and life cycle were allowed to continue at a minimal level. Traditional local leadership was however abolished. Besides this, the government also strategically resettled ethnic Vietnamese into Black Tai and other minority communities. Although the Vietnamese have actively discouraged all types of ritual behavior among the minority groups, the Black Tai have quietly continued their religious activities at home, especially the worship of ancestor spirits, and they also use shamans or sorcerers particularly to treat illnesses caused by the spirit world. They have also retained rituals that concern life cycles.



On the whole, the number of practicing shaman sorcerers and ritual specialists has become very small. Only the old people still practice the old ways, while young people are becoming increasingly integrated into Vietnamese ways. This suits the 'superstitions' attributed to minority groups such as the Black Tai.

Research Title	The Tai in Simao, Yunnan Province: Political History, Society, and Culture
Researchers	Sumitr Pitiphat Samerchai Poolsuwan
Year	2003

### **ABSTRACT**

This research report presents data from the fieldwork in southwestern Yunnan, including historical records and an analysis of social, cultural and political history of Tai ethnic groups in Simao, along the mid-Mekong river in Yunnan, China. Several Tai groups inhabit in Simao, such as Tai Nua, Tai Lue, Tai Khuen, and Tai Pong, with the Tai Nua as the largest group. The Tai Nua in Simao have similar language, culture and historical experience with the Tai Nua in Dehong of the Salween river. Chinese historical records confirm the existence of Tai settlements in Yunnan along the mid-Mekong at least from the Tang dynasty period (618 A.D.-907A.D.). The Tai were called gold-teeth barbarians (Fan Tong). They were ancestors of Tai Nua or northern Tai. At that time, this area was under the suzerainty of the Nan Chao kingdom. This research proposes a hypothesis that the Tai Nua along the mid-Mekong area migrated eastward from their former home near the Salween river. Their former home was part of the old Tain Yueh territory during the Han dynasty period (206 A.D.-220 A.D.) about two thousand years ago.

The history of the Tai in the mid-Mekong river region shows a very complex cultural and political process these people had experienced. Chinese historical records give a reliable account on important events on the south frontier of the Chinese Empire. More detailed information was found on the events after the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century onward. After sacking the Dali kingdom (formerly Nan Chao) by the Mongols, the Yuan dynasty period (1280 A.D.-1368 A.D.) tried to re-organize and to control the indigenous peoples in western Yunnan. One of these was Tai. During the mid-13<sup>th</sup> century to the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century, the Mao kingdom (Chinese called Lu Chuan) established on the bank of the Salween river became powerful but accepted Chinese suzerainty as part of the outward province administrative system (called Jimi or indirect rule). During certain periods in the Yuan and Ming dynasties, the Mao kingdom attacked other Tai groups who were under Chinese overlordship in nearby areas. The Chinese considered the Tai settlements between the Mekong and Red rivers parts of their inner empire directly ruled by the Chinese Yunnan

administrative office (Puchen) i.e. Jingdong, Zhengyuan and Yuanjiang. The Tai in the inner region were always submissive and loyal to the Chinese authority. Lu Chuan often attacked Jingdong, a military outpost set up to protect the western border and inner territory of Chinese Yunnan. The wars brought division and conflicts to Tai peoples. The Chinese controlled and organized war to politically separate the Tai on the mid-Mekong area from the Tai on the Salween river bank as well as from other cultural contacts. The Tai in the mid-Mekong river were gradually assimilated by Chinese cultural influence. But the Tai in the outward border under Chinese indirect rule (Jimi system) and in the lower Mekong river region (south of Jingdong) kept their culture rather distinct from the Chinese. These Tai groups had connection with other Tai who started to establish their kingdoms in the northern part of Southeast Asia in the late 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. Theravada Buddhism and writing systems spread from the Tai in the south to other Tai in the mid-Mekong and Salween rivers.

Two sects of Theravada Buddhism diffused into Yuannan. The Kungyon sect spread from the Lanna kingdom to western Yunnan and the land between the Mekong and Salween rivers in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century. The Kungjong sect came from the Shan State to the Tai in the upper Salween river area in the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The diffusion of different sects of Buddhism brought greater diversity to the culture of the Tai who inhabited along the mid-Mekong and Salween rivers. The Tai Nua in Simao seemed to have cultural patterns similar to Tai Khuen (in Keng Tung) and Tai Lue (in Sipsongpanna) who adopted the Kungyong sect of Buddhism, while differing from Tai Nua of Dehong who adopted the Kungjong sect. However the cultural differences among the Buddhist Tai were more marked from the non-Buddhist Tai groups who settled along the Red river in the eastern Yunnan and northern Vietnam. The later groups speak the same language and carry similar cultural traditions but never accept Buddhism. The non-Buddhist Tai seem to maintain their language and custom, not assimilated by the Chinese. Those Tai who tended to preserve their culture well mostly inhabited in remote land such as the Tais along the Jinzajiang and lower Red rivers. Certain Tai groups are slowly assimilated into Chinese culture. One can hardly find Tai people anymore in the former Tai centers or Muang such as Jingdong and Zhengyuan in Simao. Some admitted that they descended from Tai ancestors but could no longer speak Tai. Others said that their ancestors had intermarried with Chinese or Yi, a branch of the Lolo speaking minority in Yunnan.

Research Title	Tai Ethnic Groups in Vietnam: Tay, Giay and Cao Lan
Researchers	Sumitr Pitiphat Pichet Saiphan Tiamjit Puangsomjit
Year	2003

### **ABSTRACT**

This report presents the ethnological findings of a field investigation of three ethnic groups speaking Tai in Lao Cai and Yen Bai provinces, the Giay, the Tay and the Cao Lan. Based on Fang Kuei Li's classification, the Tai language family is divided into three subgroups, including Northern Tai, Central Tai and Southwestern Tai. The Giay belongs to the Northern Tai and the Tay the Central Tai. The subgroup of the Cao Lan is still controversial. Some researchers state that the Cao Lan belongs to the Central Tai subgroup, while some argue that these people are the Northern Tai. This research investigates their economic system, political organization, housing characteristics, religious beliefs, life-cycle ceremonies, costumes, as well as family and kinship.

Research Title	Tai Daeng in Hua Phan
Researchers	Sumitr Pitiphat et al
Year	2003

### **ABSTRACT**

“Tai Daeng” is a Tai ethnic group living in Sam Neua and Sam Tai, Hua Phan province in Lao PDR. There are two main causes for the past migration of Tai Daeng population, namely the outbreak of wars, especially the attacks and pillage led by the Chinese Haw in 1874, and the French colonial administrative policies in Hua Phan province since 1896. These historical events have resulted in Tai Daeng population, including those in Vietnam, to migrate into the territory formerly occupied by native Buddhist Laotians.

Furthermore, the historical factors that occurred since the past hundred years have led to the acculturation between native Buddhist Laotian population and Tai Daeng who are animists. As a result, an increasing number of contemporary Tai Daeng begins to convert to Buddhism. A comparative study of Buddhist Tai Daeng from three villages in Sam Tai, namely Ban Sam Tai, Ban Tao, and Ban Kang Nai, shows that the religious conversion phenomenon is a response to the immigration policies for the resettlement in the Buddhist territory of Laos. In addition, the conversion to Buddhist also emphasized Tai Daeng’s citizenship and equality status among the native Buddhist Laotian in the region. Therefore, the later generations of Tai Daeng begin to redefine their self-identity and refer to themselves as “Buddhist Laotian” instead.

Intricate textile weaving is a traditional knowledge that indicates the identity of Tai Daeng. This can be seen in the intricate design patterns and the highly skilled works. Textile production and utility have expanded and textiles are now being produced for commercial purposes instead of household and community uses like before. Such development process has gained support from Lao Women’s Association since 1992, and is further promoted by weaved cloth competitions organized in Vientiane since 1994. At present, international organizations also assist in the improvement and promotion of the textile production and this resulted in the adaptation of Tai Daeng’s original textile designs for the marketing benefits.

Increased communication with the outside world not only caused Tai Daeng to redefine their group identity but has also led to a transition in gender roles in which women gain more important role in economics. In addition, there is a change in the social structure of relationships

between the native people and the migrants, including other nearby ethnic groups. Today, the name of Tai Daeng in Sam Neua – Sam Tai has gained a wider recognition, transforming from a relatively unknown ethnic group in Hua Phan province to finally be known internationally as Laotian textile producers.