

Cultural Circles and Epic Transmission: The Dai People in China

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Introduction

The Dai¹ ethnic group in China and the Thai people in Southeast Asia² can all be broadly divided into two cultural groups: a Buddhist cultural circle and another circle centered around indigenous religion. Within the Buddhist circle, the Dai people practice Theravada Buddhism, celebrating the Songkran³ Festival and using a writing system created by their ancestors long ago with the result that poems were often recorded as written texts or books very early in their history. Within the indigenous circle, the Dai communities in China are generally referred to as “Hua-Yao Dai” (“Colorful-Waistband Dai,” in connection with their vivid clothing), and they adhere to folk belief or animism. These communities have little or no literacy education; consequently, their poetry has been handed down orally from generation to generation. Interestingly, in both of these Dai cultural circles, the poetry employs a key technique that can be termed “waist-feet rhyme” wherein the last syllable of one line rhymes with an internal syllable in the succeeding line. This feature—which is discussed in detail below—is embedded in both the oral and written traditions and is an important enabling device within the poetry of the Dai people.

¹ The “Dai” ethnic group is officially recognized in China; however, internationally these peoples are often designated as “Tai” or “Thai,” especially in Southeast Asia. In this essay, I use “Dai” instead of “Tai” or “Thai” according to official Chinese regulation.

² I performed fieldwork in Northeast Burma, mainly in Kengtung and Tachilek, Shan State, and in northern and northeast Thailand from April 20-29, 2012, conducting interviews in Shan villages such as Ban Hant and Ban Kosai. From May 5-20, 2012, I again worked in northern and northeast Thailand—mainly in Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, Nan, Sukhothai, Kalasin, Nakhon Phanom, Sakon Nakhon, Surin, and Sakon Nakhon—and also in some Thai villages, such as Ban Songkhwai, Ban Kotwa, Ban Maesamai. I engaged in additional fieldwork within northern Laos—mainly in Xiangkhouang, Louang Namtha, Oudomxai, Phôngsali, and Vientiane—and conducted interviews in some Thai villages, including Ban Nasy, Ban Puxi, Ban Pasak, Ban Luang, Ban Namfa, Ban Tongdy, Ban Thapao, Ban Donpoy, and Ban Lakham. Finally, fieldwork was performed in northwest Vietnam—mainly in Tỉnh Lào Cai, Tỉnh Lạng Sơn, Tỉnh Lai Châu, Tỉnh Điện Biên—and further interviews were conducted in Thai villages such as Ban Liang, and Ban Uva, among others.

³ In Chinese (and from an outsider’s perspective) the festival is called “Po Shui Jie” (“Water-Sprinkling Festival”), but in the Dai language—especially in Xishuangbanna Prefecture—it is referred to as “Songkran Bi Mai” (“Songkran New Year”), just as it is in Thailand and Laos.

Subgroups of Dai People in China

The Dai ethnic group is one of 56 minorities in China, with a population of 1,159,231 according to the Chinese National Census in 2000. Its people live mainly within Yunnan Province in southern China, especially in the Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture and the Dehong Dai and Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture. They also live in other areas, such as Gengma County, Menglian County, Jinggu County, Xinping County, Yuanyang County, Pu'er City, Lincang City, and so on, mostly residing in basins or valleys along the Nujiang River, Lancangjiang River, Jinshajiang River, Yuanjiang River, and Honghe River.

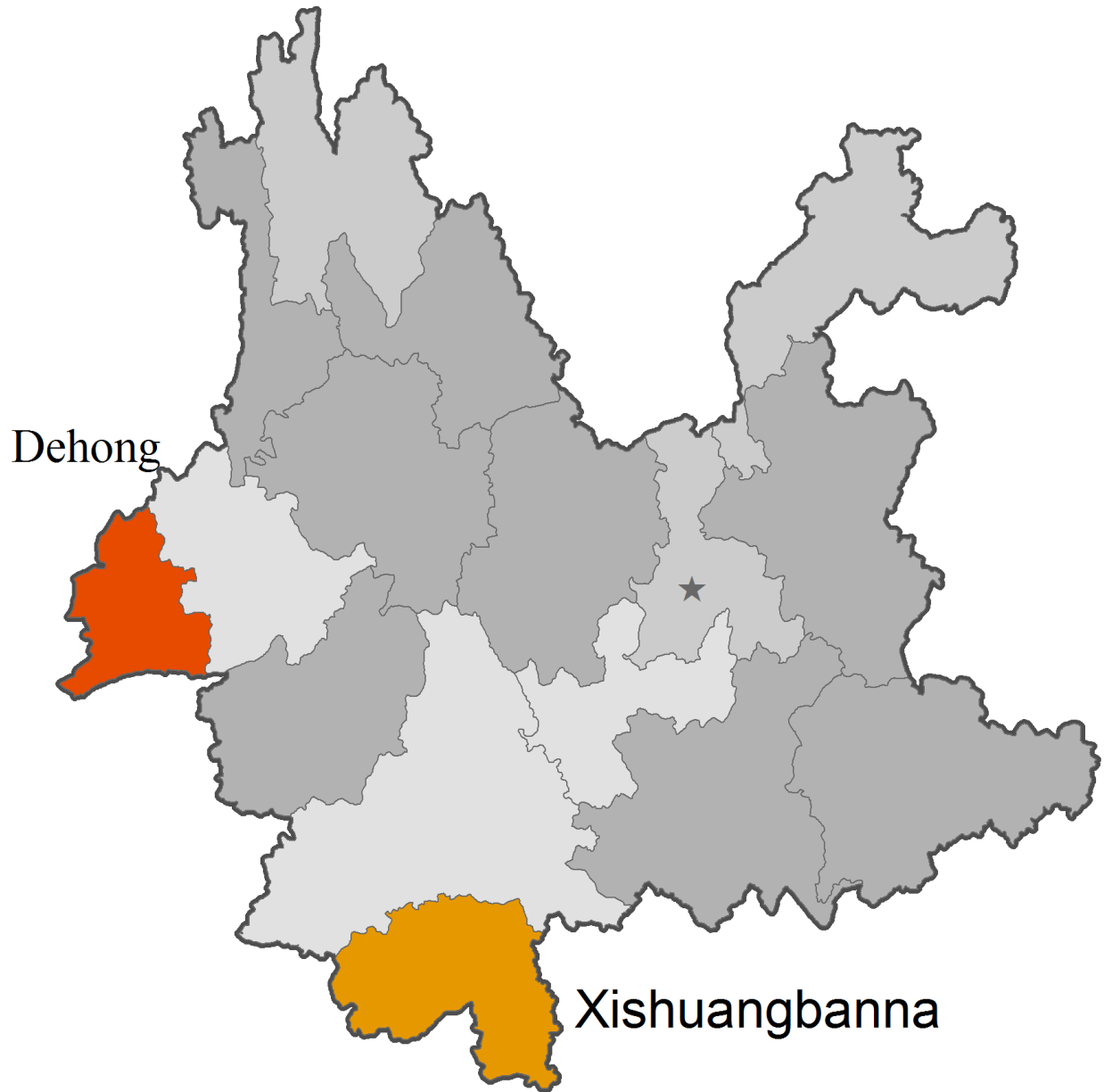


Map 1. Yunnan Province, China.

According to their own terminology and names, there are widely varying Dai branches in different areas, such as the Dai-lue⁴ (“Dai living along the Lue River”) in Xishuangbanna Prefecture, the Dai-le⁵ (“Dai living along the Lancang River upstream from Burma”) in Dehong

⁴ [tai⁵⁵lu³¹]. Because there are different Dai dialects and scripts, international scholars generally use the International Phonetic Alphabet—as I have done here and throughout the essay—to transcribe the Dai language. See further Appendix I and Appendix II.

⁵ [tai⁵⁵lɔ³⁵]. In Chinese “Dai-le” is often wrongly pronounced as “Tai-na.”



Map 2. Dehong Prefecture and Xishuangbanna Prefecture, Yunnan Province.

Prefecture, the Dai-yat⁶ (“Dai who lagged behind or separated from others”) and Dai-sai⁷ (“Dai living in Gasa Town”) in Xiping County, the Dai-dam⁸ (“Black Dai”) in Maguan County, and so on. However, some outsiders distinguish only three broader groups—the Shui-Dai (from the Chinese word *shui* [“water”] and thus understood as “Dai who live along rivers”), the Han-Dai (from *han* [“dry”] in Chinese and referring to Dai who live in farms within dry areas), and the

⁶ [tai⁵¹jat²⁴].

⁷ [tai⁵⁵saai⁵⁵].

⁸ [tai⁵⁵dam³³].

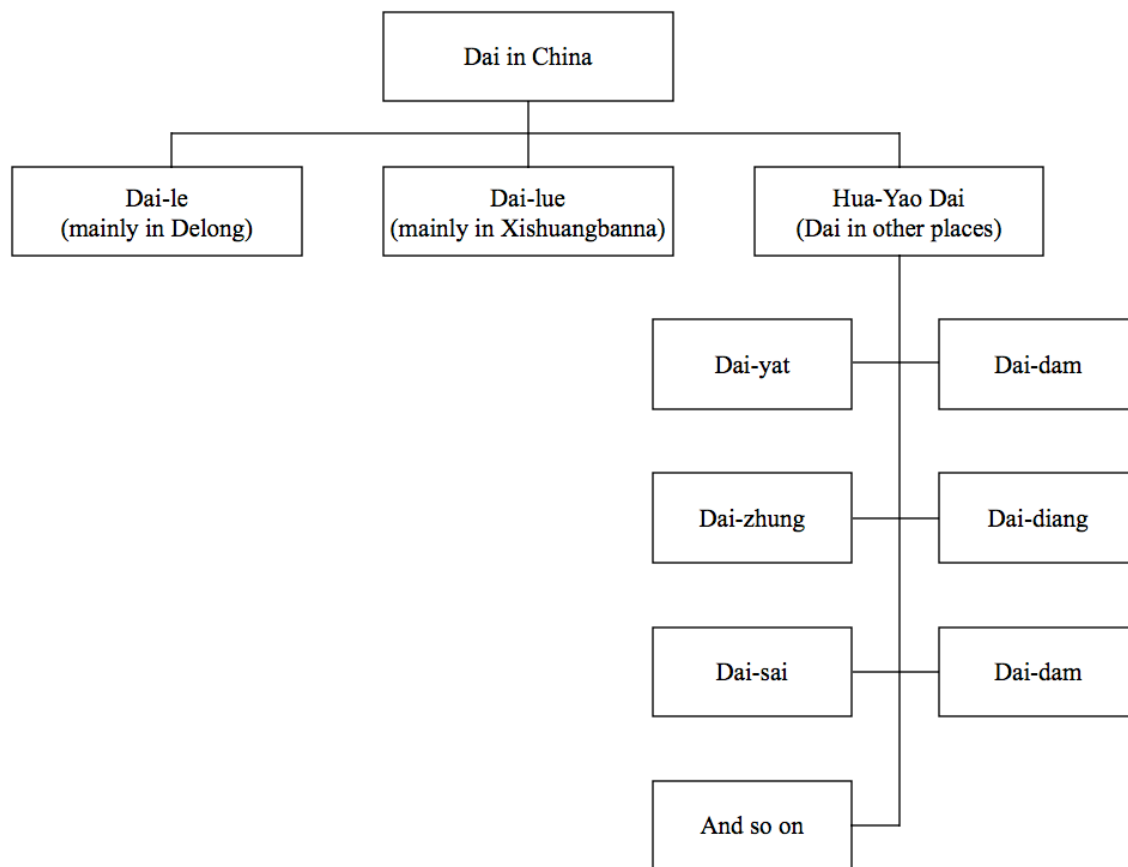


Fig. 1. The branches of Dai in China.

Hua-Yao Dai (a “catch-all” category for all other Dai subgroups)—but such classification is not accepted among the Dai people themselves.

Why are there so many branches of the Dai population in China? The historical reasons are complicated, but the following narrative provided by Thao’ enkai, a 50-year-old man from Luosa Town, Magua County, may contain relevant information of a previous migration (Qu 2010):

A long time ago, all Dai people lived in a kingdom named Meng si.⁹ There were so many people residing together that they battled each other for food, water, and other resources. As a result, some Dai subgroups left southwards led by their chief men, searching for a new world. Some people were strong enough to be the vanguard team; some people were too weak to catch up. Among these migrants, some people were nobles in precious dress and they marched more slowly. Therefore, they made an agreement: the vanguard team should cut down the banana stems as road

⁹ Meng si (also referred to by some other Dai as “Meng xi” or “Meng qi”) is considered to have been the capital of the ancient Dian Kingdom and is now known as Kunming City in Yunnan Province. There are many meanings of “meng” that range from “kingdom” to “city,” as, for example, in the Dai word “Mengkok” used to refer to the Thai capital Bangkok.

marks so that the laggard groups might follow them by these marks. However, when they found that the banana stems had grown new leaves, they thought the vanguard team had gone too far to be caught. So they decided not to pursue anymore; they then stopped and stayed with other kinds of ethnic groups, such as the Hani and Yi peoples. For instance, “Dai-yat” means “the laggard Dai;” it is one of these left-behind Dai groups.

This is a famous story spread among many Dai communities with varying details,¹⁰ and we may make some tentative conjectures accordingly. The Dai people may have migrated southward along rivers, passing through jungles on the way. Eventually they could not associate with each other any longer, and most of them migrated to southeast Asia, with a small number of them lagging behind and sharing the area with other ethnic groups. As a result of these various movements, different Dai groups may have seen their own culture influenced to different degrees by the cultures of others, and the Dai people thus developed along different branches that now bear their own unique characteristics with regard to dialects, religions, customs, dwellings, foods, and so on.

At present, the Dai language in China has been categorized into four distinct dialect groups. The Dai-lue dialect is used by 360,000 people, most of whom live in Xishuangbanna Prefecture; 480,000 people speak the Dai-le dialect, mainly within Dehong Prefecture; the Hong-Jin dialect is employed by 150,000 people, mainly in the Honghe River and Jinshajiang River basins;¹¹ and the Jinping dialect is found mainly in Jinping County and is used by more than 20,000 people.¹² Among the four dialects, the Dai-le dialect is the most widely spoken. For instance, Dai people in Lingcang, Jinggu, Menglian, Lancang, and some other areas all speak the Dai-le dialect because they migrated long ago to each of these locations from Mengmao.¹³ At the same time, the Dai-le dialect is similar to the Shan language in Shan State, Burma,¹⁴ and to that of the Tai-Ahoms living in Assam State, India.¹⁵

¹⁰ For instance, the story is also told in places such as Mosha Town, Xinping County, and even in Northern Laos. It is also found in some publications (see, for example, Feng Huaiyong 2008) and on some internet sites.

¹¹ Because there are so many diverse subgroups in these areas, their languages are further divided into five local subdialects: Yuan xin, Wuyong, Maguan, Yuanjiang, and Lu shi.

¹² On the classification of dialects, see Luo Meizhen 1993.

¹³ Mengmao, also called Mengmaolong, is considered to have been the capital of the Dai's ancient Guozhambi Kingdom from 567 to 1448 CE; it is now called (in Chinese) Ruili City in Dehong Prefecture. For further details about the Guozhambi Kingdom, see Dehong Dai Study Society 2005.

¹⁴ For example, when I did my fieldwork in Kengtung and Tachilek Counties, Shan State, during April 2012, I could communicate with the Shan villagers in the Dehong Dai language.

¹⁵ Many Tai-Ahoms scholars have been visiting Dehong Prefecture in recent years in order to trace their history and ancestral culture; they believe that their ancestors migrated from Mengmao to Assam State, and they have scriptures called *Buranjis* written in old Tai scripts that record such a history. For more details see <http://taiahoms.ning.com>.

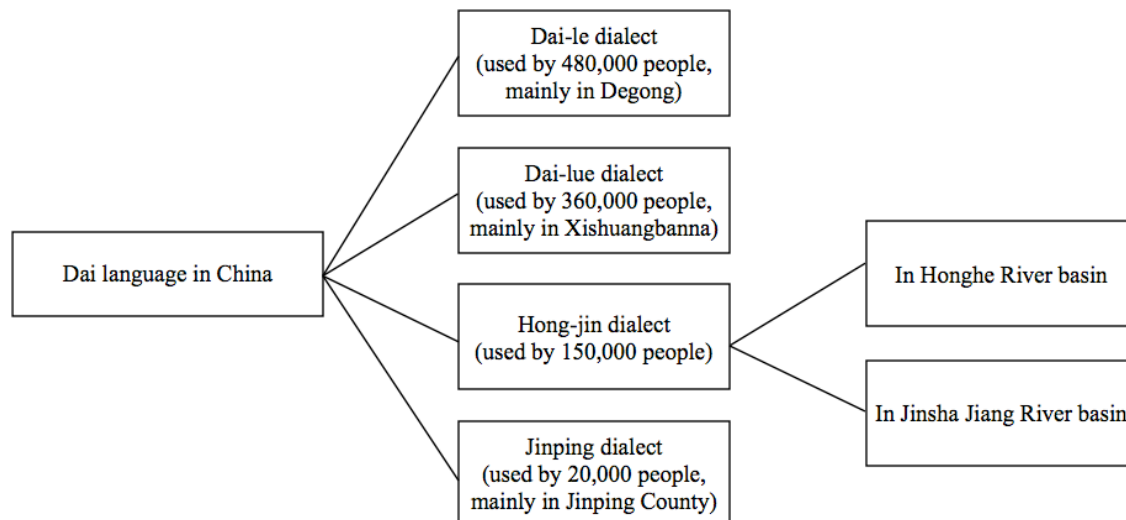


Fig. 2. The four dialects of the Dai language.

The Dai People in Two Cultural Circles

As mentioned earlier, a large number of the Dai people—mainly in Xishuangbanna and Dehong Prefectures—lie within a Buddhist cultural circle, having been influenced by Theravada Buddhism from Burma or Laos, and they therefore share similar characteristics such as their celebration of the Songkran Festival and the employment of writing systems to record and transcribe the Buddhist scriptures. The Dai people in China have actually created and developed four separate kinds of scripts, and three of them are currently in use: the Dai-le script (called “Duo-tho nook” [“Bean-sprout-shaped script”] by the Dai) used mainly in Dehong, the Dai-lue script (also called “Duo-tham” [“Classic script”]) employed primarily in Xishuangbanna, and the Dai-pong script (also referred to as “Duo-mon” [“Round-shaped script”]) used mainly in Mengmao.

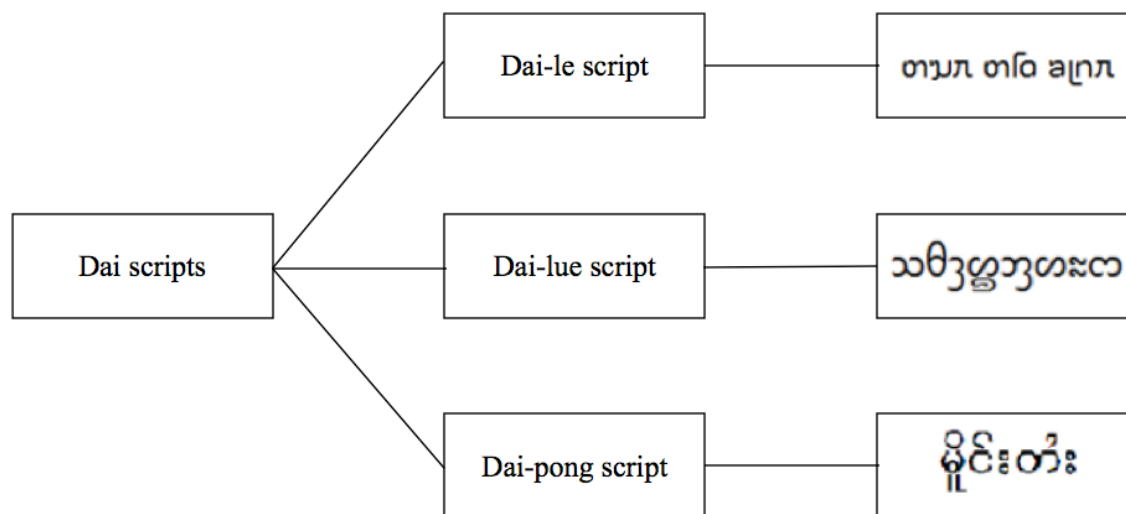


Fig. 3. Three kinds of Dai scripts in current use.

The Dai-le script is close to the Dai-pong script in both shape and phonetic system, and both of them are similar to the Shan script. The Dai-lue script shares similarities with the Lao and Thai scripts. Although these scripts display differences in their shapes, they all stem from Brahmic script. At present the reformed Dai-le and Dai-lue scripts are referred to as the New Dai scripts, which are used by publishing houses, schools, internet sites, and other official domains. However, the traditional Dai scripts are used more widely among the general population, particularly in temple settings.¹⁶

Just a small number of Dai people live within the indigenous religious cultural circle, mainly along the Yuanjiang and Honghe Rivers; most of them are Hua-Yao Dai in Yuanjiang County, Xinping County, Yuanyang County, such as the Dai-yat, Dai-sai, Dai-zhung, Dai-la, and Dai-dam mentioned above. Such Hua-Yao Dai subgroups migrated southward into northwest Vietnam¹⁷ and northern Laos,¹⁸ constituting a



Fig. 4. A Dai-luo elder who was pasturing cattle when I arrived at Lengdun Town, Yuanyang County, Honghe Prefecture. Photo by author. For more information on this and other photos, consult the eCompanion to this essay.

¹⁶ Buddhist monks must learn the traditional Dai script in order to help villagers transcribe the Buddhist scriptures written via this method. Many Buddhist scriptures are preserved in temples (called “Zhuang” in Dehong and “Wat” in Xishuangbanna), and the monks often recite or chant these scriptures for people in ceremonies, especially during the three months of Vassa.

¹⁷ The Thai people are identified officially as one of 54 ethnic groups in Vietnam, and they reside in the northwest region, mainly in Điện Biên, Lai Châu, Sơn La, and Lào Cai Provinces. During my fieldwork there (July 14-24, 2012) I found that the Thai people in Vietnam can be divided into three subgroups—the Black Thai (“Thai-dam”), White Thai (“Thai-khao”), and Red Thai (“Thai-diang”)—that all refer to themselves as [tai⁵⁵], and they do not hold to Theravada Buddhism. They are similar to the Dai-dam and Dai-khao in Jinping County, Yunnan Province, Southern China (where I performed fieldwork during July 25-30, 2012). As a Dai, I can chat easily with these Thai villagers in the Dai language.

¹⁸ Many people consider there to be three main groups in Laos: the biggest one is the Lao-luong group whose members reside in valleys and maintain a rice-planting culture; the second is the Lao-thing group (including such peoples as the Khmu) settled among the mountainsides and holding to slash-and-burn cultivation; and the third is the Lao-song group (mainly the Hmong and Yao peoples) found among the highest mountains and employing both shifting and swidden cultivation methods. Within such a categorization, the Thai people are placed within the Lao-luong group. During my fieldwork in Xiengkhuang, Luang Phabang, and Louang Namtha Provinces (July 3-14, 2012), I found that the Thai people in Laos can themselves be divided into two main parts. On the one hand, the Lue, who are actually from Xishuangbanna, practice Theravada Buddhism and are virtually indistinguishable from the Dai people; on the other, there is the Putai group, consisting of Black Thai, White Thai, and Red Thai from Vietnam. However, both groups refer to themselves as [tai⁵⁵], and I could chat with the villagers in both the Thai and Dai languages.

special Putai¹⁹ group including mainly Thai-dam (“Black Thai”), Thai-diang (“Red Thai”), and Thai-khao (“White Thai”). These Putai people then continued a migration into northeast Thailand. Although these Dai are usually divided into different branches, they do indeed share some similar characteristics: first, all of these Hua-Yao Dai subgroups adhere to indigenous religious practices and therefore do not believe in Buddhism or celebrate the Songkran Festival. Rather, they enjoy traditional Chinese festivals, such as the Spring Festival and the Mid-Autumn Festival. They are clearly much more profoundly influenced by Chinese culture than by Buddhist culture.²⁰ Second, they inhabit relatively smaller regions. For example, the Dai-sai dwell mainly in Gasa Town, Xiping County; the Dai-zhung are found in Lijiang Town, Yuanjiang County; and the Dai-khao are in Mengla Town, Jinping County. And very importantly, these Hua-Yao Dai do not in general employ any scripts for written communication or recording purposes.²¹

Different Cultural Circles, Different Epic Traditions

The Dai peoples within the Buddhist cultural circle have similar epic traditions, and these epic traditions have been influenced by Buddhism. For example, in Xishuangbanna there is the creation epic *Ba Ta Ma Ga Pheng Shang Luo* (“The God Yinphra Creates the World”),²² and in Dehong there exists another creation epic, *Gulao De Hehua* (“The Ancient Lotus”).²³ Despite their different names, these creation stories exhibit great similarities in terms of content. In both epics there is an original couple—the husband’s name is Bu sang ka xi²⁴ and the wife’s name is

¹⁹ The Putai people reside in northeast Thailand, mainly in Kalasin, Nakhon Phanom, and Sakon Nakhon Provinces. During my fieldwork in these places (May 15-30, 2012), I found that all Putai people there maintain a particular culture—as with the Putai in Laos—wherein they are deeply invested in indigenous religious practices but also influenced by Buddhist culture at the same time. For instance, they celebrate the Mangfei Festival as a call for rain in May or June, just after the Songkran Festival in mid-April.

²⁰ They also employ the traditional Chinese calendar and have absorbed many Chinese words into their dialects, such as the name Yuhuangdadi (the supreme deity of Taoism). Most of them also use traditional Chinese family naming practices.

²¹ The Dai-dam and Dai-khao in Jinping County have previously used a script; it came from northwest Vietnam as the Thai people migrated northward back into Southern China. A few Thai elders still use this script in Vietnam, but this Jinping Dai script is in danger of extinction within China, and few people can read and write it today.

²² *Ba Ta Ma Ga Pheng Shang Luo* is the Chinese pinyin transcription of this epic’s title; in the Dai language itself, the epic’s name is pronounced as [pap³¹tham⁵⁵maak¹¹kaa¹¹phəŋ¹¹saŋ³⁵lo⁵⁵]. The epic is found for the most part in Xishuangbanna Prefecture, and it has been published in several versions; see, for example, Ai Wenbian and Ai Lin 1981. Dai people will invite a singer home to sing this epic when they celebrate the completion of a new house, and this creation epic is a necessary element within the repertoires of the professional folk singers (*zhanga*) in the region.

²³ *Gulao De Hehua* is the Chinese title, but in the Dai language it is called [mo³³luŋ³⁵kam¹¹phaa¹¹]. The epic is found primarily in Dehong Prefecture, and because there are no professional singers in Dehong, this kind of epic is preserved by means of manuscripts in temples, with the monks usually reciting the epic for villagers from August to November annually. This epic has not yet been published.

²⁴ The Dai call him [puu¹¹saŋ³⁵kaa³³sii³⁵], or [puu¹¹saŋ³⁵kaai³³] for short. [puu¹¹] means “grandfather.”

Ya sang ka sai²⁵—and just as Adam and Eve in the Bible, they become the first couple in a Secret Garden, created by the supreme god—in this case, Yinphra.²⁶ It is my belief that Yinphra in these epics is actually the god Indra from Brahmanism. Additionally, *Gulao De Hehua* explains the Ancient Age as a Lotus Age, and the lotus is, of course, an important symbol of Buddhism.

Second, these epic traditions have also been influenced by Indian culture. For instance, as several Chinese scholars have shown, the heroic epic *Langa Xihe* (“The Monster with Ten Heads”)²⁷ from Xishuangbanna and its Dehong counterpart, *Langa xishuanghe* (“The Monster with Twelve Heads”),²⁸ have both been influenced by the famous Indian *Ramayana* epic.²⁹ But thanks to the existence of their scripts, the Dai people record most of their epics as Buddhist scriptures, and the oral poetry has thus become textualized. In the Dai language these epic texts are referred to as [lik⁵³] or [tham⁵⁵].³⁰

In contrast, within the indigenous religious cultural circle, the epic tradition has not been influenced by Buddhism or Indian culture, and these Dai people have never heard of the above epics. In this circle, all narrative poetry is transmitted as oral songs, called [xaam⁵⁵], and the songs exhibit little outside influence other than that exerted by the Chinese culture. Interestingly, though the epics of the Buddhist cultural circle are not found within the circle of indigenous religion, the opposite is untrue, and the songs of the indigenous religious cultural circle do indeed make their way to other Dai communities. For example, though the song *Ebing Yu Sangluo* (“Ebing and Sangluo”)³¹ goes by different names in different locations—in Dehong

²⁵ The Dai refer to her as [jaa³³saan³⁵kaa³³saai³⁵], or by the shortened form [jaa³³saan³⁵kaai³³]. [jaa³³] means “grandmother.”

²⁶ When Yinphra created these humans from clay, he originally forgot to make the wife’s breast, an omission he rectified by incorporating some clay from the husband’s palm; people now claim that this is why men always wish to touch a woman’s breast!

²⁷ *Langa xihe* is the Chinese transcription, but in the Dai language it is actually pronounced as [laan¹¹kaa¹¹sip³¹hoo³⁵]; [laan¹¹kaa¹¹] means “monster” and [sip³¹hoo³⁵] means “ten heads.”

²⁸ *Langa xishuanghe* is again the Chinese version; its actual pronunciation in the Dai language is [laak¹¹kaa¹¹sip³¹son³⁵hoo³⁵]. [sip³¹son³⁵hoo³⁵] means “twelve heads.”

²⁹ Such studies have focused on the relationship between *Langa Xihe* and the *Ramayana*, on the different versions of *Langa Xihe*, or on the transformation process of specific characters. See, for example, Li Jiang 2010.

³⁰ [lik⁵³] and [tham⁵⁵] both refer to the Buddhist scriptures in general, including all epos. Actually, Dai people do not have a distinct word for “epic;” instead, they have the word [aa³³pom¹¹] for “story,” the word [xuuu⁵⁵] for “history,” and the word [xaam⁵⁵] for “song.”

³¹ *Ebing Yu Sangluo* is the Chinese title of this song, pronounced in Dai as [o³¹piŋ¹¹saam³⁵lo⁵⁵]. [o³¹piŋ¹¹] is the name of a poor, beautiful, and young girl, who is the fifth girl in the family ranking. [saam³⁵lo⁵⁵] is the name of a charming wealthy young man, and he is the third boy in his family ranking. [saam³⁵lo⁵⁵] falls in love with [o³¹piŋ¹¹] when he travels to her hometown of Kengtuang, but his mother disapproves of their love because they are not in the same social stratum. [o³¹piŋ¹¹] goes to find [saam³⁵lo⁵⁵] after she has conceived, but she had been hurt by his bad-hearted mother and then died in the forest while giving birth. [saam³⁵lo⁵⁵] chooses to die for love when he learns the truth, cutting his throat beside her coffin. Both of them then ultimately transform into two bright stars in the sky, now called [o³¹piŋ¹¹] star and [saam³⁵lo⁵⁵] star.

Prefecture it is called *Ebing Sangluo*; in Xiping County the Dai-sai call it *Lang'e Sangluo*,³² in Maguan County the Dai-dam call it *Lang'e Luosang*; and in Yuanjiang County the Dai-la call it *Zhausang Nang'e*³³—its actual content (of a tragic-romantic, *Romeo and Juliet* type) remains virtually the same in both the Buddhist and indigenous religious cultural circles. Such songs were transmitted orally for many years before ever being written down, and this long evolutionary process has now led to songs that range from relatively simple poems to epics spanning many thousands of lines.

In the different cultural circles, then, the Dai people transmit their poetry in various ways, with written and oral traditions now coexisting in many areas. In Xishuangbanna and Dehong Prefectures, within those circles that do make use of written transmission, one can actually find hundreds of thousands of handwritten copies of epics, mainly in temples. Often an elder will copy poems for villagers to use in worship or prayer; *Kalong* (“Big Bird”)³⁴ and *Lang Jinbu* (“The Lady Who Eats Crabs”)³⁵ are, for instance, the most common songs that villagers employ in conjunction with asking for offspring. At present, the local government’s Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Center works to obtain and protect these precious manuscripts written in the Dai traditional scripts, and local scholars are working to transcribe the traditional scripts into the new scripts while also producing translations. Consequently, many Dai epics and songs have now been published in both the Dai and Chinese languages; examples include the aforementioned *Ba Ta Ma Ga Pheng Shang Luo* and *Langa Xihe*, as well as *Xiangmeng* (“The Hero Xiangmeng”),³⁶ *Qitou Qiwei Xiang* (“The Elephant

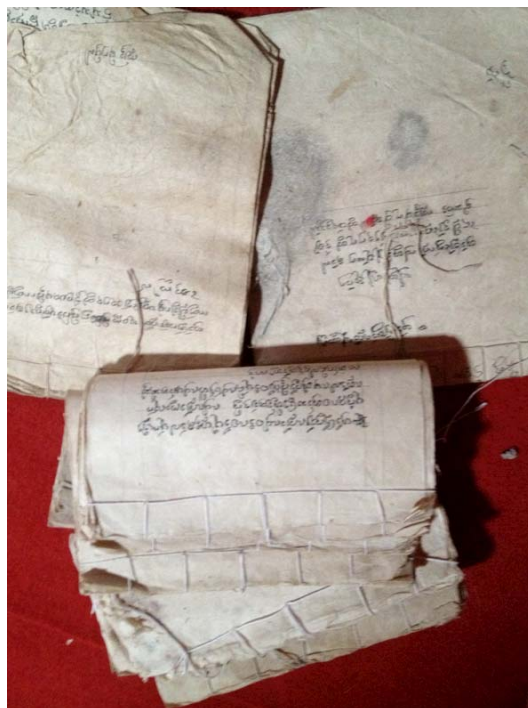


Fig. 5. Manuscripts employing traditional Dai scripts. Banyan village, Menghai County, Xishuangbanna Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province. Photo by author.

³² [laaŋ⁵⁵ >> o³¹ saam³⁵ loo⁵⁵]; [laaŋ⁵⁵] is “lady,” and [>>o³¹] is the girl’s name—the fifth one in family ranking. [saam³⁵] refers to the third one in the ranking system, and [loo⁵⁵] is the boy’s name.

³³ [tsau³¹ saam³⁵ naaŋ⁵⁵ >> o³¹]; [tsau³¹] is analogous to “gentleman” or “lordship.”

³⁴ *Kalong* [ka³³ luŋ³⁵] is Dai; [ka³³] is a kind of bird/crow, and [luŋ³⁵] means “big” or “huge.” Sometimes this song is also called [ka³³ phək¹¹], with [phək¹¹] meaning “white” and implying that the bird is sacred, affordable only to the king. This song has not yet been published as a separate volume, but the story is found in some publications under the Chinese title of *Wu Ke Jin Dan De Gu Shi* (“The Story of Five Golden Eggs”) or *A Luan De Lai Li* (“Who is A Luan?”). See Ai Feng et al. 1995.

³⁵ *Lang Jinbu* [laaŋ⁵⁵ tsin³³ puu³³] is Dai; [laaŋ⁵⁵] is “lady,” [tsin³³] means “eat,” and [puu³³] is “crabs.” In Chinese publications the name is translated as *Yi Bai Ling Yi Duo Hua* (“101 Flowers”).

³⁶ *Xiangmeng* [seŋ³⁵ məŋ⁵⁵]; [seŋ³⁵] is “diamond,” and [məŋ⁵⁵] is “kingdom,” referring to the prince. This heroic epic has been published in several versions both in the Chinese and Dai languages; see further Wang Song 2007.

with Seven Heads and Seven Tails”),³⁷ and *Qianban Lianhua* (“The Lotus with One Thousand Petals”).³⁸



Fig. 6. An elder (pictured in the center) selling his manuscripts during a ceremony on October 11, 2009, in the Menghuan pagoda, Dehong Prefecture. Photo by author.

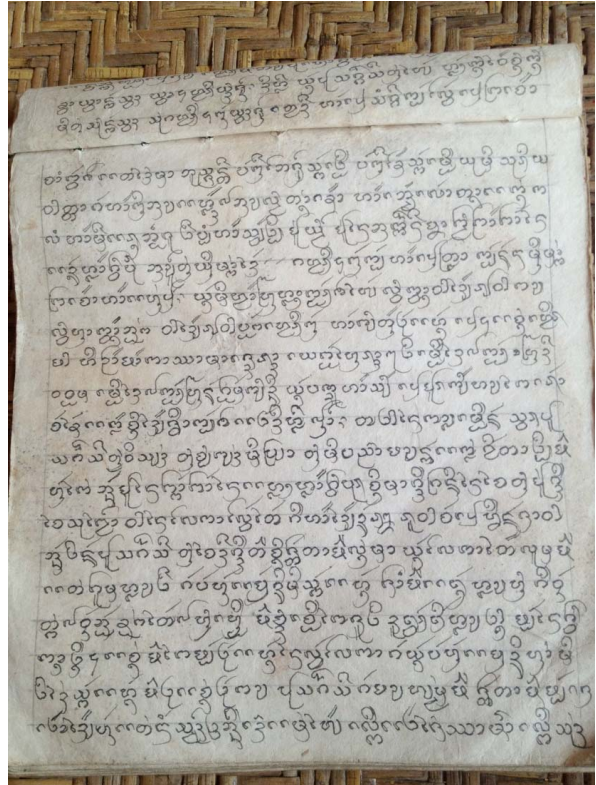


Fig. 7. The manuscript of *Ba Ta Ma Ga Pheng Shang Luo* (written in traditional Dai-lue script), preserved in the temple of Banyan Village, Mengzhe County, Xishuangbanna Prefecture. Photo by author.



Fig. 8. A performance of *Na Du Xiang* (“The Precious Door”) as part of the celebration for a new house in Mangshi Town, Dehong Prefecture, on September 28, 2009. Photo by author.

All of the narrative poetry described above derives from folk stories, Buddhist Jatakas, or a combination of the two sources. For those songs employing Buddhist material, it is easy to imagine that long ago monks adapted Jatakas to fit within the form of Dai songs as a tool for more easily explaining Buddhist tenets while at the same time also adapting Dai folk stories for

inclusion within Buddhist manuscripts. In Dehong Prefecture, there are now hundreds of A-luan poems—such as *Qingwa A-luan* (“The Golden Frog A-luan”), *Jin Lingyang A-luan* (“The

³⁷ *Qitou Qiwei Xiang* is a Chinese translation, but the Dai call this song [tsaan³¹tset¹¹ho³⁵tset¹¹haan³⁵]; see Dao Jinxiang 1988.

³⁸ *Qianban Lianhua* is again the Chinese translation; however, the Dai refer to it as [mo³³heŋ³⁵kaap¹¹]. The song has been published in several versions; see, for instance, Dao Jinxiang and Dao Zhengnan 1981.

Golden Gazelle A-luan”), and *Da Yezi A-luan* (“The A-luan Who Sold the Huge Leaf for Life”)³⁹—and all of these songs are clearly related to the written tradition of the Buddhist Jatakas. On the other hand, there are still Dai folk singers performing epics and other songs orally; these singers are called *zhangha* or *moha*,⁴⁰ both terms meaning an “expert in singing.” In Xishuangbanna, the *zhangha* perform their songs primarily within the context of important ceremonies, such as the ceremony for a newly completed house, the wedding ceremony, the *sheng he shang* (“monk promotion”) ceremony, and so on. And in Dehong, the *moha* usually dramatize songs such as *Lang Thuihan*⁴¹ and *A-luan Gongguan*⁴² in varying festival contexts.

In the indigenous religious cultural circle, where the Dai people rely on oral rather than written traditions, folk singers regularly engage in performances of narrative poetry. For example, each May in Xiping County the Dai-sai and Dai-yat celebrate the Hua-jie Festival, where people will sing songs with each other, and elders often sing ancient songs in conjunction with daily rites (see Fig. 10).⁴³ The Dai-la folk singers in Yuanjiang County also celebrate a special festival called the Mengmian-Qingge Festival, when they sing songs while hiding their faces behind beautiful handkerchiefs decorated by hand



Fig. 9. The *zhangha* Yuyan, a professional singer famous among the Dai-lue people in Xishuangbanna. Photo by author.

³⁹ In the Dai language the word is pronounced as [ɿa³³lɔŋ⁵⁵], though it is actually Burmese in origin and refers to a hero who is brave, kind-hearted, and handsome; usually he is the incarnation of Buddha. Many of the songs about [ɿa³³lɔŋ⁵⁵] have been published as books; see Ai Wenbian 1988. *Qingwa A-luan* is [ɿa³³lɔŋ⁵⁵kop¹¹xam⁵⁵] in Dai; [kop¹¹xam⁵⁵] is “golden frog.” This song is centered around the story of Buddha being incarnated as a golden frog. *Jin Lingyang A-luan* is [ɿa³³lɔŋ⁵⁵ŋe⁵⁵xam⁵⁵] in Dai; [ŋe⁵⁵xam⁵⁵] means “golden gazelle” and this song thus narrates the incarnation of Buddha as a golden gazelle. Finally, *Da Yezi A-luan* is [ɿa³³lɔŋ⁵⁵tɔŋ³³lɔŋ³⁵] in Dai, with [tɔŋ³³lɔŋ³⁵] meaning “huge leaf” and the tale thus revolving around Buddha’s incarnation as a poor boy who sold a type of huge leaf in exchange for life.

⁴⁰ [tsaŋ³³xap⁵³] or [mo³⁵xam⁵⁵].

⁴¹ *Lang Thuihan* is the Dai title, and it is called [laaŋ⁵⁵thui⁵⁵xam⁵⁵] in the Dehong Dai language, but in Xishuangbanna people call the song *Zhao Shu Thun* [tsau³¹shuu¹¹thun⁵⁵], and it has another well known translation as *The Peacock Princess*. It has been published in several versions; see Ai Die et al. 2009.

⁴² [a³³lɔŋ⁵⁵kuŋ³³kɔŋ³³]; this song concerns the story of Buddha being incarnated as a poor boy named [kuŋ³³kɔŋ³³].

⁴³ Hua-jie Festival is a Chinese name, literally translated as “Flower-Street Festival.” During this festival people dress in colorful costumes and gather in the street to make new friends, shop, or engage in conversation. The street thus looks just like a “flower-street.” The festival also provides an opportunity for adults seeking lovers; during the festival anyone—married or not—is free to hunt for a lover. Love songs are covertly performed, and women will feed their lovers sticky rice, salted egg, and fried ricefield eel, while men will give their lovers a silver bracelet, ring, or other jewelry as gift. The couple can then have further contact or even sex. Dai-yat people are free to find lovers before marriage, but after becoming married, they can renew these former relationships only during the Hua-jie Festival.

with cross-stitched patterns (see Fig. 11).⁴⁴



Fig 10. A Dai-yat elder performing during an evocation ceremony on July 28, 2010, in Mosha Town, Xinping County, Yuxi City. Photo by author.



Fig. 11. The Mengmian-Qingge Festival is held only among the Dai-la group during mid-May every year in Yuanjian County. Photo by author.

Key Features of Rhyme in the Dai Epic Tradition

Several Chinese scholars have previously investigated the evolution of Dai literature, with one of the most prominent being Wang Song, who discusses four relevant periods of this evolution in his 1983 monograph *Daizu Shige Fazhan Chutan* (“A Study on the Evolution of Dai”). The main points of his exposition—with which I agree—are as follows. In the first period, there was only oral tradition in the form of myth, ballad, and other simple songs. During the second period, all of these simple songs evolved into long narrative poetry; however, they still remained exclusively in the realm of oral tradition. Then, with the arrival of Buddhism during the seventh through fourteenth centuries, the Dai people created their scripts, and their literature entered its very important third period when much of the poetry began to be recorded and textualized. Finally, the fourth period extends from 1919 up through the present, and it is during this period that Dai drama

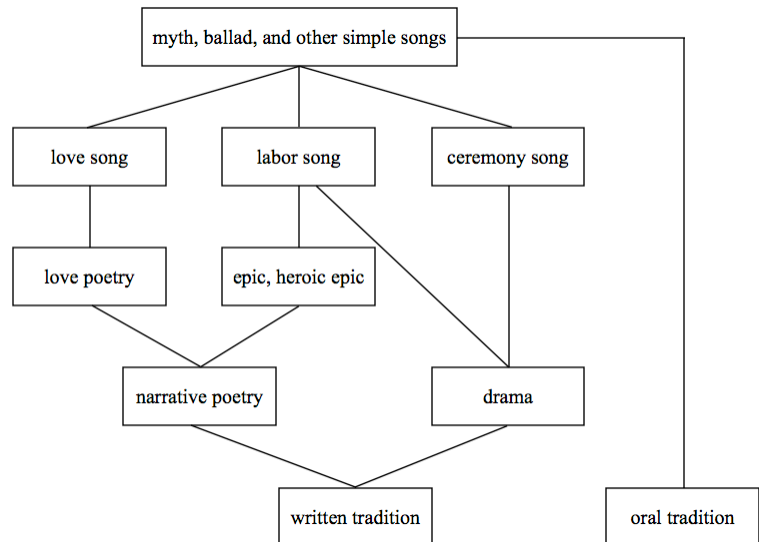


Fig. 12. The evolutionary history of Dai literature. Based on Wang Song 1983.

⁴⁴ In Chinese, *mengmian* means “mask” and *qingge* means “love song.” During the festival, men and women gather under large trees in the village, and they can sing call-and-response style either individually or in groups while also enjoying food and drink. The songs are highly formulaic in content, diction, and melody.

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. תִּבְּל . . . | O . . . |
| 2. תחלת מן עולם ויחם את כל העולם
ועל כל מקום ויחם את כל מקום | A huge fire destroyed the world,
flaming everywhere; |
| 3. ויחם את כל העולם ויחם את כל מקום | Everything was exterminated, nothing left in the land, |
| 4. ויחם את כל מקום ויחם את כל מקום | Just water left everywhere. |
| 5. ועל כל מקום ויחם את כל מקום
ועל כל מקום ויחם את כל מקום | The god dropped some lotus seeds
upon the original land; |
| 6. ויחם את כל מקום ויחם את כל מקום | The lotus seeds sprouted and grew up, |
| 7. ויחם את כל מקום ויחם את כל מקום | They bloomed with four petals of golden color. |
| 8. ויחם את כל מקום ויחם את כל מקום | Four petals became four directions, |
| 9. ויחם את כל מקום ויחם את כל מקום | And mountains emerged as pillars of the world. |
| 10. ויחם את כל מקום ויחם את כל מקום | Water became five rivers, |
| 11. ויחם את כל מקום ויחם את כל מקום | And flooded the land. |
| 12. ויחם את כל מקום ויחם את כל מקום | No human being existed yet, |
| 13. ויחם את כל מקום ויחם את כל מקום | Not even kinds of trees; |
| 14. ויחם את כל מקום ויחם את כל מקום | We know only the “He xam” grew before the
elephant emerged; |
| 15. ויחם את כל מקום ויחם את כל מקום | Rattan grew, twining the trees. |
| 16. ויחם את כל מקום ויחם את כל מקום | We know only “Yaliang” grew before the buffalo
emerged; |
| 17. ויחם את כל מקום ויחם את כל מקום | Buffalo eat all the leaves of “Yaliang,” |
| 18. ויחם את כל מקום ויחם את כל מקום | Leaving the limb only. |
| 19. ויחם את כל מקום ויחם את כל מקום | There was no king among the humans; |
| 20. ויחם את כל מקום ויחם את כל מקום
והאריץ ישב על הירח | Just the rabbit sat on the moon; |
| 21. ויחם את כל מקום ויחם את כל מקום | The moon waxed and waned. |
| 22. ויחם את כל מקום ויחם את כל מקום
והאריץ ישב על הירח | The eight Sanglu Sanglai gods come down to
earth at last, |
| 23. ויחם את כל מקום ויחם את כל מקום | Flying down from heaven. |
| 24. ויחם את כל מקום ויחם את כל מקום | Four gods become females; |
| 25. ויחם את כל מקום ויחם את כל מקום | Four gods become males. |
| 26. ויחם את כל מקום ויחם את כל מקום | People reproduce themselves, |
| 27. ויחם את כל מקום ויחם את כל מקום | Build the Kingdom Ho Hong. |
| 28. ויחם את כל מקום ויחם את כל מקום | People went through mountains to search for wet
land; |
| 29. ויחם את כל מקום ויחם את כל מקום | They stacked the wood to make fire. |
| 30. ויחם את כל מקום ויחם את כל מקום | They heaped the embankment to make the rice field, |
| 31. ויחם את כל מקום ויחם את כל מקום | And assarted the wild hill to make the dry field. |
| 32. ויחם את כל מקום ויחם את כל מקום | They took three bunches of rice shoots to cultivate |
| 33. ויחם את כל מקום ויחם את כל מקום | And took three bunches of straw to cover the roof. |
| 34. ויחם את כל מקום ויחם את כל מקום | Some people migrated to distant Sibö and Hojing— |
| 35. ויחם את כל מקום ויחם את כל מקום | Both places have fertile land— |
| 36. ויחם את כל מקום ויחם את כל מקום | And some people migrated to Gengma and Hobeng; |

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Appendix I: Dehong Dai script (Dai-le script)

Consonants

ᄁ	ᄃ	ᄅ	ᄇ	ᄉ	ᄋ	ᄍ	ᄏ	ᄒ	ᄔ
ka	xa	ŋa	tsa	sa	ja	ta	tha	la	pa
ᄖ	ᄗ	ᄘ	ᄙ	ᄚ	ᄛ	ᄜ	ᄝ	ᄞ	
pha	ma	fa	va	ha	ʔa	kha	tsha	na	

Vowels

	ᄁ	ᄃ	ᄅ	ᄇ	ᄉ	ᄋ	ᄍ	ᄏ	ᄒ	ᄔ
	a	i	e	ɛ	u	o	ɔ	ɯ	ə	au
ᄁ	ᄁᄃ				ᄁᄉ	ᄁᄋ	ᄁᄍ	ᄁᄏ	ᄁᄒ	
ai	aai				uai	oi	ɔi	uɯ	əi	
ᄃ	ᄃᄅ	ᄃᄇ	ᄃᄉ	ᄃᄋ				ᄃᄏ	ᄃᄒ	
o	lo	io	eo	ɛo				uo	əo	
au	aa	iu	eu	ɛu				au	əu	
ᄅ	ᄅᄇ	ᄅᄉ	ᄅᄋ	ᄅᄍ	ᄅᄏ	ᄅᄒ	ᄅᄔ	ᄅᄖ	ᄅᄘ	
am	aam	im	em	ɛm	um	om	ɔm	uɯm	əm	
ᄇ	ᄇᄉ	ᄇᄋ	ᄇᄍ	ᄇᄏ	ᄇᄒ	ᄇᄔ	ᄇᄖ	ᄇᄘ	ᄇᄚ	
an	aan	in	en	ɛn	un	on	ɔn	uɯn	ən	
ᄉ	ᄉᄋ	ᄉᄍ	ᄉᄏ	ᄉᄒ	ᄉᄔ	ᄉᄖ	ᄉᄘ	ᄉᄚ	ᄉᄜ	
aŋ	aaŋ	iŋ	eŋ	ɛŋ	uŋ	oŋ	ɔŋ	uɯŋ	əŋ	
ᄋ	ᄋᄍ	ᄋᄏ	ᄋᄒ	ᄋᄔ	ᄋᄖ	ᄋᄘ	ᄋᄚ	ᄋᄜ	ᄋᄞ	
ap	aap	ip	ep	ɛp	up	op	ɔp	uɯp	əp	
ᄍ	ᄍᄏ	ᄍᄒ	ᄍᄔ	ᄍᄖ	ᄍᄘ	ᄍᄚ	ᄍᄜ	ᄍᄞ	ᄍᄠ	
at	aat	it	et	ɛt	ut	ot	ɔt	uɯt	ət	
ᄏ	ᄏᄒ	ᄏᄔ	ᄏᄖ	ᄏᄘ	ᄏᄚ	ᄏᄜ	ᄏᄞ	ᄏᄠ	ᄏᄢ	
ak	aak	ik	ek	ɛk	uk	ok	ɔk	uɯk	ək	

Tones

	1	2	3	4	5	6
Mark		ᄁ	e	o	ᄃ	c
		..	˘	˙	˚	˛
Tone	33	55	11	31	53	35
Examples	ᄁᄃᄅ ("big leaf")	ᄃᄅᄇᄉ ("remember")	ᄁᄃᄅᄇ ("lighting")	ᄁᄃᄅᄇᄉ ("watering")	ᄁᄃᄅᄇᄉ ("belly")	ᄁᄃᄅᄇᄉ ("jump")

Appendix II: Xishuangbanna Dai script (Dai-lue script)

Consonants

High-pitched consonant	Low-pitched consonant	Phonetic symbol	High-pitched consonant	Low-pitched consonant	Phonetic symbol
ꨁ	ꨂ	ʔ	ꨃ	ꨄ	ph
ꨅ	ꨆ	k	ꨇ	ꨈ	m
ꨉ	ꨊ	x	ꨋ	ꨌ	f
ꨍ	ꨎ	ŋ	ꨏ	ꨐ	v
ꨑ	ꨒ	ts	ꨓ	ꨔ	l
ꨕ	ꨖ	s	ꨗ	ꨘ	h
ꨙ	ꨚ	j	ꨛ	ꨜ	d
ꨝ	ꨞ	t	ꨟ	ꨠ	b
ꨡ	ꨢ	th	ꨣ	ꨤ	kv
ꨥ	ꨦ	n	ꨧ	ꨨ	xv
ꨩ	ꨪ	p			

Vowels

Single vowel				Compound vowel			
Short vowel		Long vowel					
ꨫ	a	ꨬ	aa	ꨭ	ai	ꨮ	aai
ꨯ	i	ꨰ	ii	ꨱ	ui		
ꨲ	u	ꨳ	uu	ꨴ	uii	ꨵ	yi
ꨶ	e	꨷	ee	꨸	oi	꨹	oi
꨺	ɛ	꨻	ɛɛ	꨼	au	꨽	aau
꨿	o	ꩀ	oo	ꩁ	iu	ꩂ	eu
ꩃ	ɔ	ꩄ	ɔɔ	ꩅ	ɛu	ꩆ	yu
ꩇ	u	ꩈ	uuu				
ꩉ	ɣ	ꩊ	ɣɣ				

Tones

	High-pitched			Low-pitched		
	1	5	3	2	6	4
Mark		ꨫ	e		ꨫ	e
Tone	55	35	13	51	33	11
Examples	ꨫ ("leg")	ꨫꨫ ("fence")	ꨫꨫꨫ ("slave")	ꨫꨫ ("couch grass")	ꨫꨫꨫ ("tree crotch")	ꨫꨫꨫꨫ ("defame")