

# Surveying and Preserving Documents in Dehong, Yunnan, China

25

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In recent years research on the Tay (Dai) peoples in the broad sense has become popular, with the rise of a strong intellectual interest in rethinking the history and culture of Thailand and Laos. This new trend recognises the fact that the languages, culture and history of the Tay peoples who dwell widespread over the vast area covering Thailand, Yunnan province in the People's Republic of China, Laos, Myanmar (Burma) and Vietnam bear a close relationship to each other. As part of a move to facilitate access to basic reference materials, for many years now various organisations have been engaged in the surveying, the cataloguing and the preservation of documents written in local Tay scripts in Thailand and Laos. But for political and other reasons similar work has never been undertaken on a large scale in the People's Republic of China. This paper gives a general account of a two-year project for the survey and preservation of documents written in old Tay (Dai) script that are still extant in the Dehong Dai and Jingpo Autonomous Region 德宏傣族景頗族自治州 of Yunnan. The survey was conducted by Professor Yin Shaoting 尹紹亭教授, the Head of the Anthropology Department in the Humanities Faculty of Yunnan University 雲南大學人文學院人類學系 with funding from the Toyota Foundation, between 2001 and 2003. The old Tay (Dai) script known as Lik Tho Ngok or the bean sprout script, used in the Dehong Dai and Jingpo Autonomous Region (hereafter Dehong) is somewhat similar to that of the Shan of northern Myanmar (Burma), and it is hoped that the surveying and preservation of documents written in this script will contribute to deeper understanding of the common literary and cultural heritage shared by the Tay in these two areas.

## **Brief Description of the Tay Ethnic Groups in Yunnan**

In China almost all of the ethnic group known as Tay (Dai) dwell in Yunnan province. The official ethnic designation used by the Chinese government since the 1950's is Dai, or Daizu 傣族 (Dai Nationality), and this category does not include the Zhuang 壯, Buyi 布依 and other groups that many scholars outside China regard as members of the Tay. The Tay population is mainly concentrated in the Dehong Dai and Jingpo Autonomous Region 德宏傣族景頗族自治州 (population 325,800 as of 2002), the Xishuang Banna Dai Autonomous Region 西雙版納傣族自治州 (population 299,400 as of 2002), the Lincang 臨滄地区, Baoshan 保山地区, Simao 思茅地区, Chuxiong 楚雄地区, Yuxi 玉溪地区 and other areas.

The Tay population has increased steadily since the 1950s as can be seen from the following table.

**Table: Population of the Tay in China, 1953-2000 (unit people)**

Year	1953	1964	1982	1990	2000
Tay population	478,966	535,389	839,496	1,025,402	1,158,989

The geographical distribution of the Tay is sometimes classified by three autonyms that have been identified: *Tay Lü* for those in Xishuang Panna; *Tay Nä* for those in the Dehong Dai and Jingpo Autonomous Region, Gengma county 耿馬縣, Měnglian county 孟連縣, Lincang county 臨滄縣, and Shuangjiang county 雙江縣 and so forth; and *Tay Ya* for those distributed in Xinping 新平, Yuanjiang 元江 and along the banks of the Hong He 紅河 or Red River (see Daizu Jianshi Bianxiezhu, 1985: p. 243). Traditionally the old scripts used have also roughly accorded with these autonym groups; the Tay Lü have employed a dhamma script similar to that of the Lanna Kingdom, while the Tay Nä have adapted and modified the Burmese script. But this is only a general rule, and more research needs to be done to determine the variations in scripts amongst the Tay Nä.

Neighbouring peoples refer to the Tay by a number of ethnonyms. Mon-Khmer speakers such as the De'ang 德昂族, Wa 瓦 and the Plang (Bulang 布朗族) simply call them *siam*, while Tibet-Burman speakers employ a wide variety of terms. The Jingpo 景頗 call them *la sa:m* and *a sa:m*, the Lahu 拉祜 refer to them as *pi ts'o*, the Achang 阿昌 use the name *siam* and the Hani 哈尼 speak of them as *tay*, *bi ts'o*, *mi ts'o* and *a ts'o* (Daizu Jianshi Bianxiezhu, 1985: p. 243).

### Publication of Works Written in Tay Scripts in Yunnan

The Tay (Dai) peoples boast a rich literary tradition, and have left large amounts of documents written in their own scripts for posterity. Most of these are books and records that cover an array of subjects such as history, religion, astronomy/astrology, calendrical science, literature, art, medicine, production technology and so forth. During the 1980's an organ of the Committee for Nationalities in the Yunnan provincial government 雲南省民族委員會, known as the Office for the Planning, Publication and Collation of Old Books 古籍整理出版規劃辦公室, published some literary and historical works written in old Tay script in their series, *A Collection of Translations of Old Books by the Minority Peoples of Yunnan Province* 雲南少數民族古籍譯叢. Each of these works had a Chinese translation with a facsimile of the text in Tay script attached. Below I list a few of the titles of works published in this series:

1. *Měnglian Xuanfushi* 孟連宣撫司(History of the Mäng Lēm Pacification Commissions; Title of Tay text reproduced *Lik Pün Mäng Mäng Lēm Long Ho Kham*), Yunnan Minzu Chubanshe, Kunming, 1986, Series Number 5
2. *Měngle Wangzu Shixi* 孟泐王族世系 (The Royal Lineage of Mäng Lü; two Tay texts reproduced), Yunnan Minzu Chubanshe, Kunming, 1987, Series Number 10
3. *Lifeng* 厘捧 (A Heroic Poem called Lifeng; one Tay text reproduced), Yunnan Minzu Chubanshe, Kunming, 1987, Series Number 13
4. *Jinggu Tusi Shixi* 景谷土司世系 (The Royal Lineage of the Jinggu Tusi; one Tay text and excerpts from Chinese historical sources concerning Jinggu reproduced), Yunnan Minzu Chubanshe, Kunming, 1990, Series Number 18
5. *Měng Guo Zhanpi Ji Měng Mao Gudai Zhu Wang Shi* 孟果占璧及孟卯古代諸王史 (Histories of the Ancient kings of Mäng Kosambi and Mäng Maaw; two Tay texts reproduced the *Pün Pöt Süng Ce Mök Khaaw Maw Long Mäng Kocampi* (A Short History of the Kosampi Kingdom) and *Saa Měng Pü Tün Khä Mäng Ko Sam Pi* (A Chronicle of the Lineage of the Kosampi Kingdom), Yunnan Minzu Chubanshe, Kunming, 1988, Series Number 19
6. *Daizu Fengsu Ge* 傣族風俗歌 (Songs of the Customs of the Dai: one Tay text reproduced), Yunnan Minzu Chubanshe, Kunming, 1988, Series Number 21

The publication of this series has definitely been very helpful in making important works on Tay history and literature available to scholars. The translations have been done by native speakers well versed in the old scripts, and often include footnotes which make comparisons with Chinese and other Tay sources, thus enhancing our understanding of the contents of these texts. But readers must be careful when using them because in many cases there are problems with the way in which they have been reproduced. Consider the following two examples:

1) In many cases the editors did not reproduce the earliest known surviving manuscript of the text, but merely gave a facsimile version of a handwritten copy made from an original text. Of course, this presents a myriad of problems. The reader has no way of determining what type of mistakes may have been made in the process of copying and how faithfully the text reproduces the original; naturally one must assume that changes in orthography, vocabulary and syntax may have occurred. Let us take the *Saa Měng Pü Tün Khä Mäng Ko Sam Pi* which was completed in the 43<sup>rd</sup> year of the reign of the Qianlong 乾隆 emperor (i.e. 1778) as an example. This work is held by the Government Archive Office of the Dehong Dai and Jingpo Autonomous Region, but the Tay text included in publication (5) *Měng Guo Zhanpi Ji Měng Mao Gudai Zhu Wang Shi* listed above, is a facsimile of a hand-copied version made specially for this publication and is not a reproduction of the text held by the Archive Office.

2) The old Tay Nä script has no tonal markers, so to make it easier for people to read, editors need to supply a transcription into modern Tay Nä, which does have tonal markers.

It also goes without saying that when publishing works in old Tay script, a thorough study and collation of all extant texts should be made to ensure that the text is as accurate as possible.

### **The Project and its Implementation**

For a variety of reasons some of the valuable old books and documents in old Tay script have been damaged and lost, and no concerted effort has been made to preserve them. It goes without saying that the problem of how to save the old books and documents of the Tay has become a pressing issue faced by the academic community. The situation of the Tay Lü of Xishuang Banna, where education in the monasteries has succeeded in reviving literacy levels among males in old Tay script, may be regarded as an exception, and this situation certainly does not pertain in the Lincang district and the Dehong Dai and Jingpo Autonomous Region west of the Lancang (Mekong) River. Generally speaking, at present the number of people who can read old Tay script is gradually dwindling, and the job of finding, organising and cataloguing old books and documents written in old Tay script is becoming increasingly difficult due to the passing away of the older generation.

Professor Yin Shaoting of Yunnan University implemented a two-year project between 2001 and 2003 as a pilot project to test the feasibility of implementing larger scale preservation work in Yunnan in the future. He chose the Dehong Dai and Jingpo Autonomous Region because large amounts of old books and documents written in old Tay script were known to be extant there, and because a local government office in the Region proved willing to co-operate. However, since no reliable data on the quality and quantity of the old books and documents existed, the project had to begin by undertaking a thorough and systematic survey of them. The goal of the first year was to identify the types and quantities of old books and documents, and to compile a list of them. In order to decide priorities for microfilming it was imperative to assemble information on the types and quantity of extant Tay texts. The actual selection of materials and their microfilming was done in the second year on the basis of the data collected in the first.

#### **First Year**

The team organised by Professor Yin devoted the first year of the project to surveying; they undertook a survey of old books and documents written in old Tay script held by government organisations as well those in private collections in Dehong. The Committee for the Working and Instruction of Nationality Languages and Scripts of the Dehong Dai and Jingpo Autonomous Region 德宏州民族語言文字工作指導委員會 (hereafter abbreviated to CWINLS) undertook the survey work. The survey work was organised as follows.

1. Meetings were held at the CWINLS in Mǎngshì in November and December 2001 in order to compile survey sheets. It was decided that in view of the decline in old Tay literacy the survey should also include a summary of the document surveyed. This would aid future generations in understanding the contents of the texts, and help researchers to ascertain the value of the texts for preservation. As a result workers were asked to read each text that they surveyed and summarise the contents of it in Chinese.
2. Since the CWINLS did not have enough staff members to conduct the survey by itself it had to employ local learned elderly people to do most of the surveying work. The CWINLS either gave texts to survey, or asked them to survey texts in their own temples or villages. Many of them could not write in Chinese, so they filled the sheets in Tay Nǎ and the CWINLS staff translated them into Chinese later.
3. In December 2002 the project team published a selection of the survey sheets used to collect the bibliographical data in book form for the dual purpose of demonstrating the true value of these neglected materials to the Chinese authorities as well as the academic world at large. The Yunnan Minzu Chubanshe in Kunming published the book under the title, *A Synopsis of Tay (Chinese Shan) Old Manuscripts in the Dehong Autonomous Region of Yunnan, China*.

### **Second Year**

The team selected documents for microfilming on the basis of the data assembled from the initial year survey and conducted the photographic work during the second year. Microfilming was done by the Technical Department at the Yunnan Provincial Archives 雲南省檔案館技術處.

The Yunnan Provincial Archives transported their filming equipment to Mǎngshì, and photographed from March through to May in 2003. Some books were brought to Kunming and photographed there in August 2003. A catalogue of the contents of each reel has been compiled (unpublished).

One negative and two copies have been made. The negatives are stored in air-conditioned facilities at the Yunnan Provincial Archives, and one copy kept for reading at Yunnan University. The other copy is available for reading at the CWINLS office in Mǎngshì. The CWINLS has been given microfilm readers.

### Bibliography

Daizu Jianshi Bianxiezu 傣族簡史編写組 (1985), *Daizu Jianshi* 傣族簡史 (Brief History of the Dai Nationality), Yunnan Renmin Chubanshe 雲南人民出版社, Kunming 昆明  
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