

Tai Funeral Customs: Towards a Reconstruction of Archaic-Tai Ceremonies

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I. Aims and Methods

Tai speaking peoples¹ are widely distributed over mainland Southeast Asia. They can be found as far west as Assam and northern Burma, they form the dominant groups in Thailand and Laos, they constitute the most numerous group of the ethnic minorities in northern Vietnam and they are well represented in the Chinese provinces of Kweichow, Kwangtung and Yunnan (see Map). The various Tai languages are closely related and this has led linguists to believe that their spreading from a common origin is relatively recent, certainly not older than 2000 years² and possibly much more recent³.

In general these Tai speakers do not form a close-knit ethnic group. The Burmese Shan are aware of the fact that they and the Thai and the Laotians speak related languages, but this does not lead them to seek closer ties. When people in central Thailand hear representatives of some of the Vietnamese Tai speak, they are often amazed at the close similarity between their

¹ In this essay, Tai refers to the group of languages spoken by, amongst others, the Hkamti, Shan, Thai, Lü, Yuan, Lao, Black Tai, White Tai, Red Tai, Tho, Chuang and Chung-Chia.

² W. J. GEDNEY, quoted by J. R. CHAMBERLAIN (1975: 58).

³ A recent tentative reconstruction of the diversification of Tai languages is provided by CHAMBERLAIN (1975).