

Nan Zhao Invasions and Buddha idols of Northern Thailand and Laos in the 7th to 9th Centuries

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Abstract

One of the mysteries of the history of the early Tai migrations into Thailand and Laos as well as of the arrival of Buddhism in both countries centers on the links of the Tai peoples to the Yunnan (China) based empire of Nan Zhao in the late 7th to the end of the 9th century and its invasions of northern Thailand and Laos. This article focuses on the available evidence of this historical legacy and seeks to identify which aspects of the history might now be corroborated and where to search for further evidence. While it may be possible to confirm the path of some of the invasions, the links of ancient Tai legends to Nan Zhao may simply be markers of invasions and alliances of that era rather than evidence of movement of Tai peoples into those countries at that time.

Keywords: Nan Zhao, Laos, Thailand, Buddhism, Khun Bulom

Introduction

In 2013, the author visited the ancient earthen walled town of Wiang Lo, north of Phayao City (Phayao Province), in northern Thailand, where an exhibit of ancient Buddha idols and other artifacts found in the town, dating back to the bronze age, was being placed in a small museum around the Wat Si Phon Muang (Sri Pon Muang). Although the town is mostly known as a Tai “mueang” or principality from the 13th century, the Buddha idols in the museum were a mystery. They were unlike other Buddha statues of the north and the faces of the Buddha idols seemed somehow “Western” rather than Asian, with longer, prominent noses and longer faces. It was as if some ethnic group, unknown in the region but following Buddhism, had left them and then disappeared. The statues were not described or dated.

In 2015, the author was in the region again, this time visiting Phrae, some 180 km away, further south. Phrae is also an ancient earthen walled city. Its museum, at the Wat Luang, is also filled with unusual Buddha idols. Here, however, the origin of the city is not described as a 13th century Tai *mueang* but is dated much earlier, as the result of an inscription (not displayed) and chronicles of the *wat* (temple or monastery) in the town that describe its founding in the early 9th century, by Nan Zhao, coming on a route from the north. The inscription was found at the Wat Phra Non (“sleeping Buddha”) where the stone Buddha, dated to 874 C.E., is said to be of the Nan Zhao². Unfortunately, there is no way to see the

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² The author of this article uses anthropological methods as the first step in approaching the history on site and how it is viewed today. There are apparently no published sources on this inscription to even confirm the language or script, and none of the scholars in the region whom this author consulted (including the Chiang Mai Ecole Francaise d’Extreme Orient (EFEO)) and two translators of ancient texts in the region are aware of them.

original features of that Buddha for comparison since stucco now encases the original and has transformed it and doubled its size from 3 to 6 meters.

Though the author has only visited a handful of these ancient walled towns in the region coming down the Mekong from Yunnan, China (including Dali in Yunnan, Xieng Khaeng and Suvanna Khom Kham on the left (east) bank of the Mekong in Laos, Chiang Khong³, Chiang Saen, Nan (Chae Haeng), Phayao, and others in Thailand on various rivers branching off of the Mekong, as well as Luang Prabang in Laos), the history of the ancient Nan Zhao empire, from the mid-7th to the early 10th century) and its influence on the area, is largely absent from these sites. At best, chronicles seem to include legends of local leaders from the period, but little seems to confirm or link them.

The history of Nan Zhao is confirmed both by its own chronicles and contemporaneous records of the Han Chinese who engaged in war and alliances with it, but the actual extent of the empire outside of Yunnan and its influences on peoples of the region has largely been speculative and a source of debate. Not even the ethnicity of the ruling group is clear (though it is now thought to be “Bai”, a Tibeto-Burman group, rather than Tai) (Mackerras, 1988; Yu Qing Yang, 2008). Nor are the roles and locations of minorities in the empire very clear, particularly in relation to Tai peoples (though there are some chronicles of movements of the Pyu from Myanmar and of Chinese Han from Chengdu) (Backus, 1981; Luce, 1959; Bin Yang, undated; De Lacouperie, 1970).

Most of the history of northern Thailand and Laos in this period has focused only on a single question: whether or not the Nan Zhao rulers belonged to a Tai group and whether their invasions into northern Laos and northern Thailand constitute an early arrival of the Tai people (and Theravada Buddhism) in competition with the native Mon peoples (then Indianized and Buddhist) and Khmer at the time (Dore, 1987; Jumsai, 1967). The question works backwards in history, starting from the fact that Tai peoples took control of the areas of modern Thailand and Laos in the 13th and 14th centuries and that they adopted Buddhism as their dominant religion. It is essentially a political and a spiritual question that seeks to establish a political claim to territory that is some 500 years earlier than what is currently confirmed and that seeks to provide some certainty to a history and identity that is essentially unknown from between the disappearance of the Red River bronze drum cultures of early peoples (“Dong Son”) in the first century C.E. and the arrival of invading Tai warlords of various Tai groups (Tai Lao, Sukhothai, Tai Yuan, Tai Lue, and others, dating here to about the 13th century and perhaps a century or two earlier for related groups such as the Tai Nung/Zhuang).

Essentially, what we have now is a deductive and nationalistic history of the period with arguments and rebuttals. The Thai and Lao seek to explain and justify their emergence in the areas of Mon peoples in Thailand and Laos. The Bai and other groups in Yunnan seek to explain their origins. The Han Chinese seek to explain their control over minority areas.

Little of this history actually reflects the standard approach to history, which is inductive: starting with the evidence, asking about evidence that is missing, and then drawing conclusions from an objective analysis of the evidence itself using theories and models of

Readers from other disciplines are invited to follow this article using other methods.

³ The author is not aware of any dating of the citadel here. Volker Grabowsky believes it dates only from the 19th century.

identity formation, cultural diffusion and migration. Some authors have started to identify cultural and technological characteristics and markers of the different peoples and have set a basis for beginning such analysis (Lufan, 1989; Lloyd, 2003; Walker, 2012).

This article continues an inductive historical approach starting with analysis of available evidence and context in Thailand and Laos using a variety of cultural geographic and cultural historic analytic methods. The article maps existing evidence of Nan Zhao and of neighboring empires and also weighs the various legends and oral histories in different regions, comparing the stories with each other in an attempt to fill gaps in the record.

The article begins with a summary of what is known from various chronicles about Nan Zhao as well as what is known about other empires in the region at the time and establishes the setting by putting the various peoples and interactions on a map of the region.

The piece then describes the different types of available evidence in Thailand and Laos for examining the history of Nan Zhao and describes the method used by the author for collecting and weighing existing evidence. The article then describes the different physical/archaeological evidence and the anthropological oral history and chronicle evidence that exists and seeks to analyze it.

This evidence is then placed on a map of Thailand and Laos as a basis for discussion and generation and comparison of theories as to the history of the period.

While it may be possible to confirm the path of some of the invasions, the links of ancient Tai legends to Nan Zhao may simply be markers of invasions and alliances of that era rather than evidence of movement of Tai peoples into those countries at that time.

The Setting: Nan Zhao According to Historians

While not much is known about Nan Zhao beyond the records of its kings and wars that can be placed on a map, given that the empire left little archaeological record, there is some record of the technological innovations that gave them an advantage. Less is known about and agreed upon regarding the ethnicity of the Nan Zhao and their relations with various ethnic groups.

Mapping of Nan Zhao

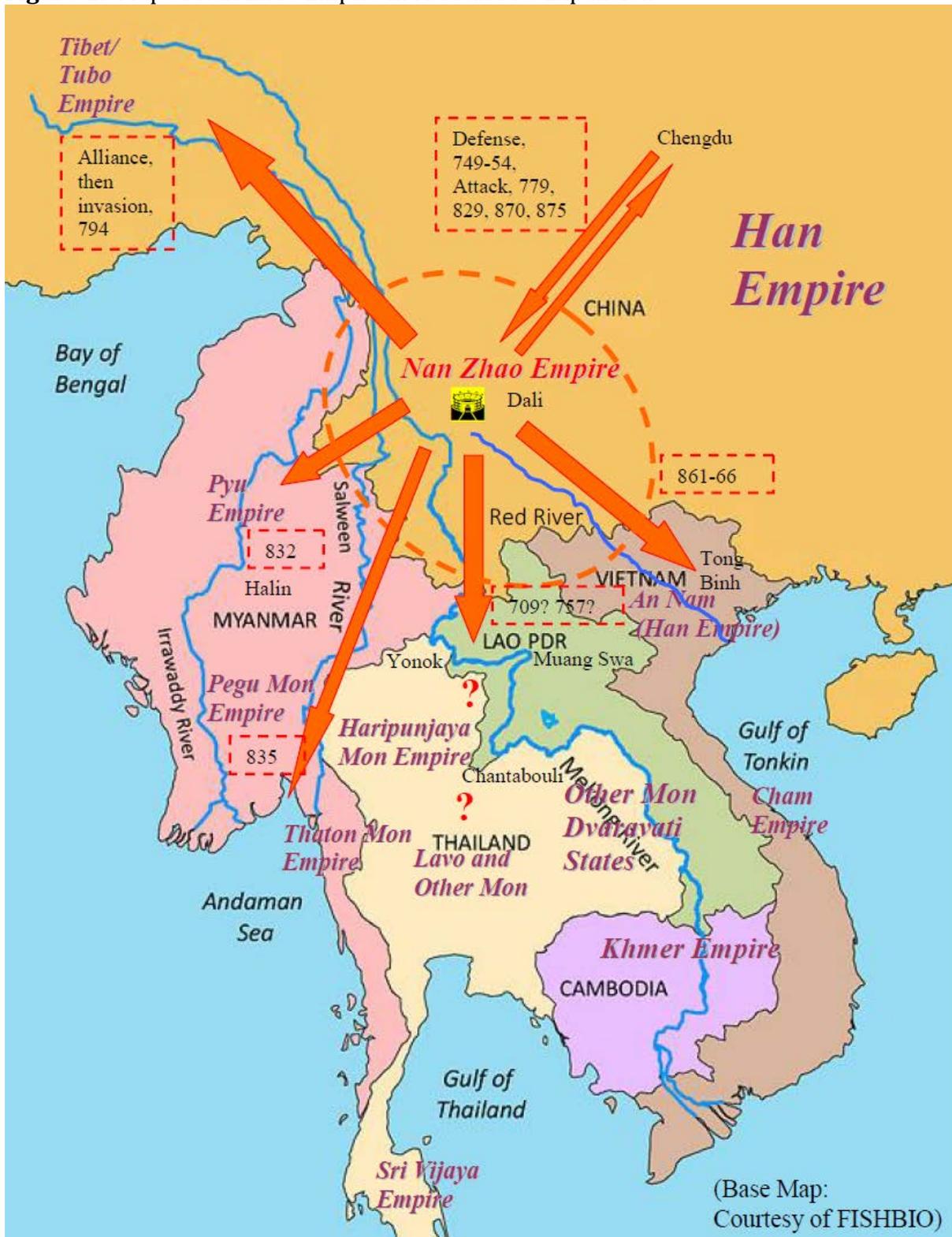
Given the Nan Zhao inscriptions and chronicles and confirmation in Chinese and Tibetan writings, there is general agreement on the military history of Nan Zhao, the names of its kings, and the chronology of leadership and war during the era of the kingdom from 649 to 902 B.C.E. (Backus, 1981; Bin Yang, undated; Luce, 1959).

Figure 1 places this information on a map, with Nan Zhao (Yunnan, today) in the center and with arrows depicting expansion and or wars with neighboring groups (and polities) as well as the various dates recorded. It is almost as if Nan Zhao expanded out in all directions like the spokes of a wheel, looking for areas of conquest. In almost all of the military adventures, the expansion was down rivers and, in the case of the attack on the Han Chinese in the area of contemporary Viet Nam that they controlled, it depended first on expanding against the Han into eastern Yunnan so as to have easy access down the Red River.

Note that this map projection is somewhat distorted in the areas to the west and north and the Bay of Bengal that is in fact much farther from Tibet and Nan Zhao than indicated by this map. The map is chosen for the focus on the Mekong region and a way to get a glimpse into Nan Zhao's actions and strategies in an overall context.

The military history makes it difficult to establish Nan Chao's borders. The reason that Nan Zhao's borders are usually recorded as centering in Yunnan, despite all of these military excursions outside of Yunnan, is that some of the military actions were only short lived or were not until the last third (the last three or four generations) of Nan Zhao. The relationship with Tibet was essentially that of an alliance for a long period, followed only later by invasion. Some histories of Tibet (Tubo) actually see the history in reverse, with Nan Zhao under Tibet from 750 – 794 C.E. The conquest of the Pyu and Thaton was deep into what is now Myanmar but was only 70 years before the collapse of Nan Zhao. The invasion of Viet Nam was quickly turned back by the Chinese and the battles into Han territory to the north were largely a seesaw of victories and losses.

The real mystery, however, is the area of present-day Thailand and Laos. While perhaps there are Chinese or Nan Zhao records of conquests that are unknown to this author, most sources only mention attacks in this area on the "Chen La" Khmer, without any clear listing or dates or territories. There are suggestions of two different dates of attack in various Lao chronicles, including two dates for Muang Swa (Muang Sua) (Luang Prabang) as 707 or 757 C.E. An inscription reported in Phrae and chronicles there, described later in this article, are for dates throughout the 9th century, but this is on the Thai side and not from the Nan Zhao or Chinese. The mention of Chen La territory (using the Chinese name for the pre-Angkorian Khmer) is also a bit of a mystery because almost all of the inscriptions from Chen La, itself, seem to end about the mid-7th century when the Bhava dynasty fell, with the Khmer replaced by Mon peoples throughout Issan (eastern Thailand today, bordered by the Mekong) and the areas north of the Gulf of Thailand, not expanding again until the 9th century, after Nan Zhao had fallen. The possible place the two empires could have met could only be guessed by the extent of Chen La, which is also highly disputed (and discussed further below) (Lempert, n.p.1 and 2).

Figure 1: Map of Nan Zhao Empire in Asia and its Expansion

Nan Zhao Technology

The evidence of Nan Zhao as a military power able to move so quickly and extensively suggests that it possessed some kind of technological advantage over its neighbors. Yet, given the example of other empires in Asia that simply copied the technologies of others to use to their own advantage (such as the Vietnamese copying the Chinese) or that essentially perfected military organization without a productive technological base (the Mongols in 13th century and the Huns and Avars, also conquering on horseback, a few generations before the Nan Zhao), the advantage could also have been largely military (Sun Laichen, 2003).

While the expansion of the Han Chinese, Mon and of the Khmer had come with technological innovations in agriculture and water management including dikes and canals, moats, and water reservoirs that began to increase populations and promote urbanization, there is not much evidence that the capital, Dali, was a major center with large constructions or that the strength of Nan Zhao was fueled by any technological innovation in agriculture or animal husbandry. What the Nan Chao may have perfected was terraced farming that was particularly suited to highlands and perhaps the choice of grains to go with it. Terraced farming is not unique to Nan Zhao. It is found in the Philippines and also in some places in Cambodia and even along the Mekong (in Khammouane province in southern Laos, possibly brought by Tai groups in an unknown era, probably not linked to Yunnan given its absence in connecting areas). But these terraces, still used in Yunnan, may have originated with Nan Zhao in the growth of barley, with the use of water from springs (Manshu Jiaozhu, v. 7, p. 171, cited in Lloyd, 2003, footnote 40).

Though some Buddhist towers and grottos survive around Dali, there is no surviving productive infrastructure on the landscape today or reported by archaeologists and no artifacts or records of innovations that would fuel production (Lufan, 1989). However, it is clear that Nan Zhao had a writing system, using Chinese Han characters, that they had a hierarchy of empire, and that they adopted Buddhism as an organized religion.

What the maps of the empire make clear is that the most rapid and successful expansion was on rivers and that Nan Zhao was vulnerable to attacks on land (where they faced the Han). That suggests they had an advantage in boats and particularly in navigation on mountain rivers.

If the Nan Zhao developed expertise in military and social organization, it is possible that Buddhism, itself, served as a means of solidifying social hierarchy and population control that promoted this empire as it had promoted several earlier Indian empires (the Maura, the Gupta, and the Pallava).

Though Nan Zhao had no direct sea access (and may have been seeking it in its attacks of Myanmar and Viet Nam, down major rivers towards the sea, in order to become a global empire), its borrowing from both China and India suggest that it was positioned between major empires on what would have been the land trade routes of that time, enabling it to use its central position to advantage.

Borders with and Influence on Other Peoples

To put Nan Zhao in context in Southeast Asia also requires some understanding of the strength of all of the different groups with which it might have had military contact. While Figure 1 includes all of the different empires around the borders of Nan Zhao, not all of these borders are historically agreed upon. Some are hotly debated, like the extent of the Khmer incursions into Thailand and Laos. Others are simply accepted on faith without much

examination at all, based on little more than some Chinese naming of regions or much later naming in chronicles, like the areas of Lavo/Lopburi in central Thailand or the Thaton Mon empire to its west. Some are not even clearly recognized as empires, such as the Mon Dvaravati of Isan, that seem to be several regional groups that have what seem to be military citadels, but have only been defined as regional polities in recent work by this author (Lempert, n.p.4).

Table 1 (see page 26) offers a summary of these empires or kingdoms based on a large selection of sources (Baptiste and Zephir, 2009; Brown, 1996; Bellina and Glover, 2008; Coedes, 1968; Chihara, 1996; Gagneux, 1977; Gagneux and Pfeifer, 1970; Gitau, 2001; Goudineau and Lorrillard, 2008; Guillon, 1999; Guy, 2014; Lempert, n.p.1, n.p.2, n.p.3, n.p.4, n.p.5, n.p.6; n.p.7; Lorrillard, 2013; O'Reilly, 2007; Parmentier, 1954; Piriya Krairikish, 2012; Stargardt, 1994; Wales, 1969; Viravong, 1964; Kunstadter, 1967; Le, 1955; Higham, 2002, 1996; Groslier, 1966; Sarassawadee, 2005; Stuart-Fox, 1997; Taylor, 1983; Wyatt, 2003).

The value of considering the history of different groups during different chronological periods before, during and after Nan Zhao rule is that it is a way to test the extent of the Nan Zhao expansion and influence. Rising and falling of a political empire or kingdom that matches the rise and fall of Nan Zhao could suggest that the area was actually under the sovereignty of Nan Zhao, perhaps as a tributary. Falling and then rising in a way opposite to the history of Nan Zhao would suggest that the area was a rival benefitting from Nan Zhao's fall to the Chinese.

What this table notes without clear explanations, is that:

- the expansion of the Haripunjaya Mon Empire from the Ping River in northern Thailand, was somehow contained or turned back in the east on branches of the Mekong during this period;
- the history of the area of Lavo/Lopburi, south of Haripunjaya and accessible on rivers from the east of it, is somehow silent during this era, with reports and construction of new structures ending during (or disappearing from) this period and with reports of the Chen La Khmer on its eastern areas like Sri Thep also ending by 650 C.E., with no return of the Khmer or rise of any other power here during this period. In places like U-Thong, then on the Gulf of Thailand's Coast due to sea levels, the most clearly datable archaeological find from this period is an Arabian coin from the era of Al Mahadi, dated 775 – 785 C.E.
- There are reports of attacks from Java on the Vietnamese coast of the Cham in 757, 774 and 797 C.E., perhaps sensing a weakening or distraction of powers along the coast.

What the comparison suggests, but without direct evidence, is that the Nan Zhao may have exerted control in Thailand to the east of Haripunjaya and possibly even further south to the Gulf, in parallel to the influence it seemed to exert on Myanmar, to the west, down the Salween River to the coast.

The Place of the Tai Peoples

Both the placement and the role of Tai peoples in the Nan Zhao empire remain a matter of speculation with little real evidence. There is a consensus that the bronze era Red River civilization of the Bronze Drum (Dong Son) culture from roughly the 5th century B.C.E. to the 2nd century B.C.E. was that of Tai groups and their influence spread up and down the Mekong River and into the Gulf of Thailand, as well. Whether or not this was an empire and included movement of Tai peoples as some believe, with bronze drums as a symbol of war and control (Lempert, n.p.7) or whether it was just “trade” is debated. By the 11th century,

there is already clear evidence of the movement and/or cultural identification of Tai peoples with specific territories that are reflected in Tai identities and languages that span all the way from northern Viet Nam to northern India and throughout Laos and Thailand (Chamberlain, 1972, 1998; Higham, 2002, 1996; Taylor, 1983). In between, there is speculation that Nan Zhao moved population groups in much the same way that Tai peoples forced relocated communities (as did various Burmese empires) between the 14th and 19th centuries and as they do today (what today is called “resettlement” for the purposes of “economic growth”) or that Tai groups voluntarily moved at that time as part of the leadership of Nan Zhao. There is an historical record of the Nan Zhao moving Chengdu (Han Chinese) artisans to Dali and of relocation of the Pyu to Dali, but this may simply have been part of the practice of conquest of elites and their intellectuals rather than of population relocations.

The Dong Son Tai peoples did originally have technological superiority in the region in navigation as well as advantages in weapons and military organization (archery, spears and bronze swords) but they were matched by China and India and there is no record of any Tai empires for the next 1,000 years. Tai social organization and advance seems to have been disrupted with the conquest of the Red River capital of Co Loa (near Hanoi) by the Han in the late 3rd century B.C.E. that may have led to some migration and dispersal of Tai peoples southwards, including to Indonesia and Malaysia, around that time (Baker, 2002; Evans, 2016).

The common legends of the Tai peoples today, including the Thai/Siamese and Lao (Tai Lao) are of a shared origin from either before or around the time of Nan Zhao (discussed below) in an area slightly south of the Red River but around three other major rivers, in the mountainous area of Dien Bien Phu, now in far northwestern Viet Nam and near to the Lao border in the north. There is access here to the Da and Ma Rivers, with the Ma River paralleling the Red River towards the sea to the east, and to the Ou River to the west, that heads to the area of the Mekong around Luang Prabang. There is an earthen citadel, called Xam Mun, just at the foot of the mountains in Dien Bien Phu, that is suggested as being a citadel of the Tai Lue around the 11th century, but perhaps much earlier since there are Dong Son type bronze drums in the area, and potentially also from the time of Nan Zhao. There has been no archaeological examination of the citadel, itself. The mountains and valleys in the area of Muong Tan⁴ and Oi Nu, near the Nam Rong River, around Dien Bien Phu heading slightly east towards Son La, are recognized as places of stone age habitation that Vietnamese archaeologists suggest as the area of origin of Tai peoples.

⁴ This is the Anglicization of the Vietnamese spelling of the place name for the local “Muang”.

Table 1. International Relations Timeline of Neighboring Empires of Nan Zhao in Thailand and Laos					
Neighboring Empire	Time Periods of the Nan Zhao Empire				
	<i>Preceding Nan Zhao</i>	<i>Early Nan Zhao, 649 – 712 C.E.</i>	<i>Era of Pi-luo-ge, father and son, 712 – 778 C.E.</i>	<i>Late era, 778 – 902 C.E., era of expansion and decline</i>	<i>Collapse in 902 C.E. and following</i>
<i>Haripunjaya Mon</i>	- No records or evidence until 658 C.E. in the north other than a possible “Lawa” kingdom and others known only in legend	Chammathewi (Cāmadevī) is said to found Haripunjaya, travelling north up Ping River, from Lavo/Lopburi, in 658 C.E. and establishing control of the Ping and areas east to the Mekong, with the capital in Lamphun.	Haripunjaya maintains its empire on the Ping River but there is no further evidence in areas east towards the Mekong, suggesting that it lost territory.	Same as preceding	Same as preceding. Different records note an attack on Haripunjaya from “Nakhon Sappan” in 896 – 898 followed by an attack from Lavo (<i>Muang Boran</i> , 1979) that some scholars think was a century later, but Haripunjaya continues. Records tell of a strong king, Athittayarat, who rebuilds the capital in Lamphun in 897 - 901.
<i>Lawa (possibly Mon Buddhist but other sources say Shan animist)</i>	Described as an indigenous people in the north, along all of the rivers, possibly with a citadel and worship area in Chiang Mai	They seem to ally with and merge (after defeat by) rival groups with no clear cultural evidence or control	Same as preceding	Same as preceding	Same as preceding
<i>Lavo Mon</i>	Gupta Empire falls in 550 C.E., though Pallava strengthens (after 575 C.E.) and Lavo may have emerged in the areas of the Thai Gulf at this time, perhaps facing Chen La expansion. Different founding dates are 538 C.E. and 648 C.E.	No clear records or identifying characteristics other than belief that an entity existed in central Thailand parallel to its spinoff, Haripunjaya	Same as preceding	Same as preceding	Same as preceding but with Srivijaya/ Nakhon Si Thammarat attacking from the south in 903 and expanding influence over the area. The Khmer also seem to have entered here in the 9 th century with major battles a century later in 1001 all the way north to Haripunjaya.

<i>Mon Dvaravati Issan</i>	Gupta Empire falls in 550 C.E., though Pallava strengthens (after 575 C.E.) and Mon begin to expand in Issan	Mon influence strengthens in Issan and Mekong to Vientiane	Same as preceding	Same as preceding but with incursions from Khmer, particularly in southern Issan	Same as preceding
<i>Khmer</i>	Chen La Bhava Dynasty, 598 – 628 expands throughout Issan (and up Mekong?) and into east-central Thailand	Chen La declines and falls by 680 C.E.	-	Angkorian Empire forms and expands again into Issan, 802 -	Angkor strengthens during 10 th – 12 th centuries, expanding up the Mekong to Luang Prabang. Yasovarman I, 889 – 901 expands into Khorat and possibly further east (Lopburi).
<i>Vietnamese</i>	Under Han rule with various revolts such as those of Ly Bi (circa 541 – 547); Ly Nam De (570 – 602)	Chinese establish rule under the Duong Dynasty, 7 th – 10 th centuries, fortifying Hanoi in 617. Le Ngoc establishes a small kingdom in Thanh Hoa in 628.	Same as preceding, with Hanoi fortified again in 767 – 801.	Local revolts include those of Phung Hung (786 – 791). Attacked by Nan Zhao, 862 – 866 but then the Chinese General Cao Bien asserts authority and also establishes a citadel on the Cham border in Nghe An (to 875).	The Duong dynasty attacks Hanoi and establishes local rule in 902 – 935. Chinese begin to fortify the mountainous areas in the north of Vietnam to exert control over the Tai minorities in the 10 th – 11 th centuries.
<i>Cham</i>	The Gangara Dynasty establishes itself from the 6 th – 8 th century as a distinct kingdom between Chen La and the Vietnamese, especially around Hue and Danang.	Same as preceding. Vietnamese begin to move south into Cham area creating a mixed culture between the Red River to Ha Tinh.	Mai Hac De from Ha Tinh unites Khmer, Cham and maybe Mon in Lao and creates a kingdom, including Hanoi, 722 – 735. Indonesia attacks, 757.	A kingdom, Hoan Vuong/ Virapura, is said to exist between the Cham and Khmer, 758 – 859, with other major Cham cities to the north of it in 8 th – 9 th centuries. Java attacks, 774 and 797.	Chiem Thanh Kingdom of the Cham adopts Buddhism and becomes a major sea power from 988 to 1471.

Methodology of the Cultural Mapping and Search for Cultural Markers on the Thai and Lao Landscapes

In the absence of additional written records of Nan Zhao as to their control over areas in northern Thailand and Laos, the determination of history requires an evidentiary search for cultural markers in the form of architecture/infrastructure, art, cultural practices, and oral histories and chronicles. In the case of Nan Zhao, that is difficult because the empire itself seems to be an amalgam of peoples with few clear markers of specific structures or art. However, there are some. Moreover, the various chronicles from each locality can be viewed in comparison as ways of corroborating events from different perspectives as well as looking for commonalities and omissions as clues, particularly where travel routes by river or land would have required crossing certain areas.

For the past two decades in several countries in Southeast Asia as well as a bit in Eastern Europe, the author has been cataloguing and visiting hundreds of historical and cultural sites as a guide to helping peoples to recover, interpret and apply their lost and forgotten history so as to take pride in their past, to build understanding and tolerance with different peoples, to preserve their heritage for tourism and beauty of their communities, and to understand the historical relationships of peoples to their natural and social environments in ways that can promote healthy and sustainable communities (Lempert, 2012; 2013; 2015). This study also follows that approach in the search for markers of and identification with the Nan Zhao in northern Thailand and Laos.

Identification of Sites

The literature review to identify sites in Thailand and Laos is too extensive to fully document here. Key background materials that include the recordings of the early French archaeologists, more recent archaeological studies, and recent compendiums and interpretations were offered above. Additional sources include surveys of sites and finds (Supajanya and Pongsri, 1983; Ngaosrivathanas, 2008; Woodward, 2003; Raquez, 1902; Himmakone, 2010).

Following the review, the author has made intense visits on the geography in both Thailand and Laos over a period from 2009 to 2015, as well as to areas along the rivers of northern Viet Nam (1996 to 2005) and to Yunnan (2005) and other provinces in China north of the Vietnamese border. These visits included provincial museums, religious sites, reported archaeological sites, and communities in between.

Evidentiary Traces of Nan Zhao in Thailand and Laos:

Both the direct and comparative evidence of the Nan Zhao in Thailand and Laos are slight but their placement on the Yom and Mekong Rivers suggests significant entrance of the Nan Zhao into the area.

Direct Evidence, through Inscriptions and Recordings

Direct evidence of which this author is aware places the Nan Zhao in only two sites – the city of Phrae in northwestern Thailand and the city of Muang Swa (Luang Prabang). Both

are significant, however, because of the potential control they exerted over territory and rivers.

The evidence in Phrae is the inscription stone and sleeping Buddha, mentioned above, from 874 C.E. that is reaffirmed in chronicles of the city's major wats, with names of a Nan Zhao leader (Phraya Pol) and various local leaders over a period from 828 to 900 C.E. Four wats (including two Buddha towers) are attributed to this period as well as the city wall. Phrae is located on a major river, the Yom, that branches from an area near to the Mekong well to the north of the city some 200 km. To the south, the river continues through the area that became Sukhothai, then to Nakhon Sawan, and it connects with the Chao Phraya River heading out to the Gulf of Thailand.

In Muang Swa, the records are only those of a chronicle, apparently with direct mention of Nan Zhao, but with much earlier dates than from Phrae (either 707 or 757 C.E.). Muang Swa is directly on the Mekong and at a point about equal distance from the branch point to Phrae (about 200 km).

Comparative Evidence through Architecture, Art and Cultural Influences

While there are some distinctive cultural markers of Nan Zhao that would be indicative of Nan Zhao influence if they were found elsewhere, none appear to be found in this region or anywhere outside of Nan Zhao. Among them are the terraced form of agriculture, particular Buddha towers, and specific types of carvings found in grottoes around Nan Zhao. Nor do there appear to be place names or linguistic influences or any other recognizable cultural practices. However, there are two cities in northern Thailand, including Phrae and Wiang Lo, on another nearby river, the Ing, branching off of the Mekong, that have a peculiar type of Buddha idols that the author speculates could be a sign of influence from Tibet during the Nan Zhao period. There is incidental evidence of one other in Xam Neua in northern Laos near to the Ma River.

Although Dali itself has some distinctive features, that are a mix of Chinese and local influences, this author has not spotted clear similarities anywhere in Thailand or Laos.

- The Dali citadel has probably been rebuilt several times and is square shaped, unlike the oval shaped citadel in Phrae and other rounded citadels in northern Thailand and Laos, including the one in Phrae, and unlike several square citadels in northern Laos, including one around Muang Sing that is described as "Chinese" and undated and the Luang Prabang citadel that is dated later. Other citadels, like that of Wiang Phukha (Vieng Phouka), along the Nam Tha River in northern Lao, is simply attributed to Mon peoples but during this era (and linked to it by the Luang Nam Tha chronicles as described below).

- The three pagoda towers just north of the city wall, including the octagonal Qianshun/Qiansun pagoda tower with its 16 multiple layers and two others of 10 layers, are dated to the mid-9th century and are said to be influenced by Xian, China. Neither of the two (rebuilt) Buddha towers in Phrae that are dated to the Nan Zhao era are similar to these, nor are they distinguishable from other pra thats in northern Thailand.

- The Shizhong grottos of Shibaoshan, some 110 km northwest of Dali, in Jianchuan, include some 139 Buddha idols as well as statues of Nan Zhao kings in decorative robes and warriors. Though the faces are founded and "Chinese", the features and clothing offer types for comparison but the author is unaware of any likenesses in Thailand or Laos.

- The "Iron Pillar" at Midu, that is also dated to the era of Nan Zhao but may be later, also has no equivalent in Laos or Thailand.

The unusual Buddha idols that the author notes at Phrae and also at Wiang Lo do not seem to have any similarities to those in and around Dali and cannot be said to represent images of Nan Zhao rulers. If they are not markers of Nan Zhao, then what are they? Alternately, if Nan Zhao was a collection of far flung peoples who did not have contact with areas like Phrae and Wiang Lo in other eras, could it be that they indicate movements of other peoples (not the ruling Bai peoples, but perhaps Tibetans or Burmese) in the empire?

The idea that these Buddha idols might represent Nan Zhao is highly speculative, but the hypothesis is at least offered here with some photographs in Figure 2. The Buddha idols in Phrae are shown in the upper and lower right hand corners while one from Wiang Lo is shown in the lower left hand corner. For comparison purposes, a rare Pyu bronze Buddha idol from the 8th to 9th century is presented in the upper left hand corner. In the center, for comparison of the statues to the facial characteristics of Tibetans, is a photo of the 14th Dalai Lama. Although Buddha idols are described as “Buddha images” in Thailand, most statues are, in fact, designed based on human models and reflect physical characters of the populations in which the artists live and work.

What is unusual about the Phrae and Wiang Lo Buddha idols is not only the elongated faces but that the noses and ears jut out from the head while the eyes are at an angle. No Nan Zhao images nor images like this appear in the main museums or guides to art in Thailand (Buribhand and Griswold, 2008; Thailand Office of National Museums, 2008). Moreover, Thai sources do not recognize any Buddha images in this region (later the area of the Tai Yuan) other than those of the Mon Haripunjaya and others further south, as well as the later Khmer Buddha idols that have no similarities. “As far as we know, the Thai Yuan ... produced no Buddha image at all before the end of the 13th century” (Buribhand and Griswold, 2008, at 15).

Buddha idols in the region have specific types. There are the round faces of Thai Buddha idols; straight noses of Lao; distinctive hair styles and body proportions of Mon, and Khmer; funnier faces of the Tai Lu; and round faces of Chinese. The other elongated faces on Buddha idols, but with flatter noses and long flat ears, are those described as “U-Thong style” Sukhothai era Buddha idols, that are in fact found not far from this area (down river from Phrae on the Yom River) but that are from the 13th century. Although they are described as “U-Thong” Sukhothai Buddha idols, not a single Buddha idol of this style is actually displayed in the museum at U-Thong, itself, far to the southwest of Sukhothai, nor in wats in U-Thong, nor in the provincial museum of Suphan Buri, the province in which U-Thong is found, nor in its *wat*.

Are the Buddha idols here from the Pyu or evidence of later Burmese influence from later battles in the 11th century (invasion from Pegu)? That is possible, but the invasions were quickly repelled with not enough time to transfer statues. Moreover, one would expect to then find a trail of them along the route of invasion, coming from the west. There are a few similarities to the Pyu Buddha, which is described as having a “large ovoid head”, a “long fleshy nose with a slight hook at the end, perhaps a vestige of Indian influence” (Walker, 2012).

Pheuipanh Ngaosrivathana reports a small Buddha statue with such unusual features that is also out of place, around the area of Xam Neua, in northern Laos.

Other kinds of evidence, such as toponyms (ancient place names that would reveal Tai or Bai or other influences) are inconclusive (Lloyd, 2003).

Mapping this Evidence

The different sites, with these various types of evidence, are presented on a map of northern Thailand and Laos, in Figure 3. Although speculative, Wiang Lo is placed on the map with a smiling face to represent its unusual Buddha idols. The place of Xam Neua is also noted.

Since the Nan Zhao seemed to favor river travel, various key rivers are also shown, though the river names are not included. The Mon Haripunjaya empire is clearly situated on the Ping River system. The four small rivers branching off of the Mekong into northern Thailand include the Kok River, the Ing (going to Phayao and including Wiang Lo), the Yom River (with Phrae and continuing southwards as described) and the Nan River. The ancient reputed center of the Tai peoples of Xam Mun is shown as well as the rivers around it, the Da to the northeast, the Ma, heading southeast, and to the west, connected to the Mekong is the Ou River. The Red River is shown further north, cutting through northern Viet Nam.

Given that the Nan Zhao occupation of Phrae and areas further to the north is described as having continued over several decades and given that Nan Zhao would have had to follow a route down the Mekong and then the Yom River to reach Phrae, it can safely be assumed that Nan Zhao would have controlled that part of the river system if not all four of the branch rivers. The lack of presence of Haripunjaya here after the era of Nan Zhao began seems to lead to the easy conclusion that the dotted oval area was under Nan Zhao control even though it has never been shown on maps this way.

Although the lack of evidence of the Nan Zhao in the region might lead to the conclusion that Nan Zhao simply entered this area for plunder without leaving anything, the evidence at Phrae suggests otherwise. To try to explain why additional evidence might have disappeared and what else was going on here requires looking to the chronicles of the region for answers.

The map also presents a circle around the historic area of Tai peoples as at least a starting point for hypotheses about Tai peoples in the region that also might be expanded by the chronicles.

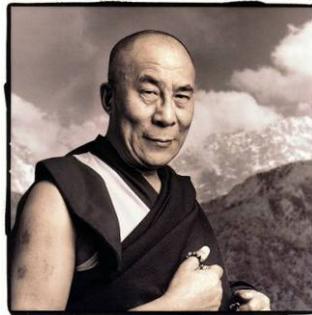
Red question marks remain on the map in areas where the earlier historical analysis raised questions about potential Nan Zhao expansion that have yet to be corroborated by any direct or comparative evidence.

Figure 2: The Unusual Buddha idols of Northern Thailand: Nan Zhao?

8th – early 9th Century Pyu (Myanmar) Buddha, Lindemann Fund (reprinted with permission from Walker, (2012), Authorhouse)



Statues in Wat Luang, Phra (Photo of Museum Photo, by Hue Nhu Nguyen)



Tibet's 14th Dalai Lama (Public domain image from https://charlestontibetansociety.files.wordpress.com/2011/07/dalai_lama.jpeg)

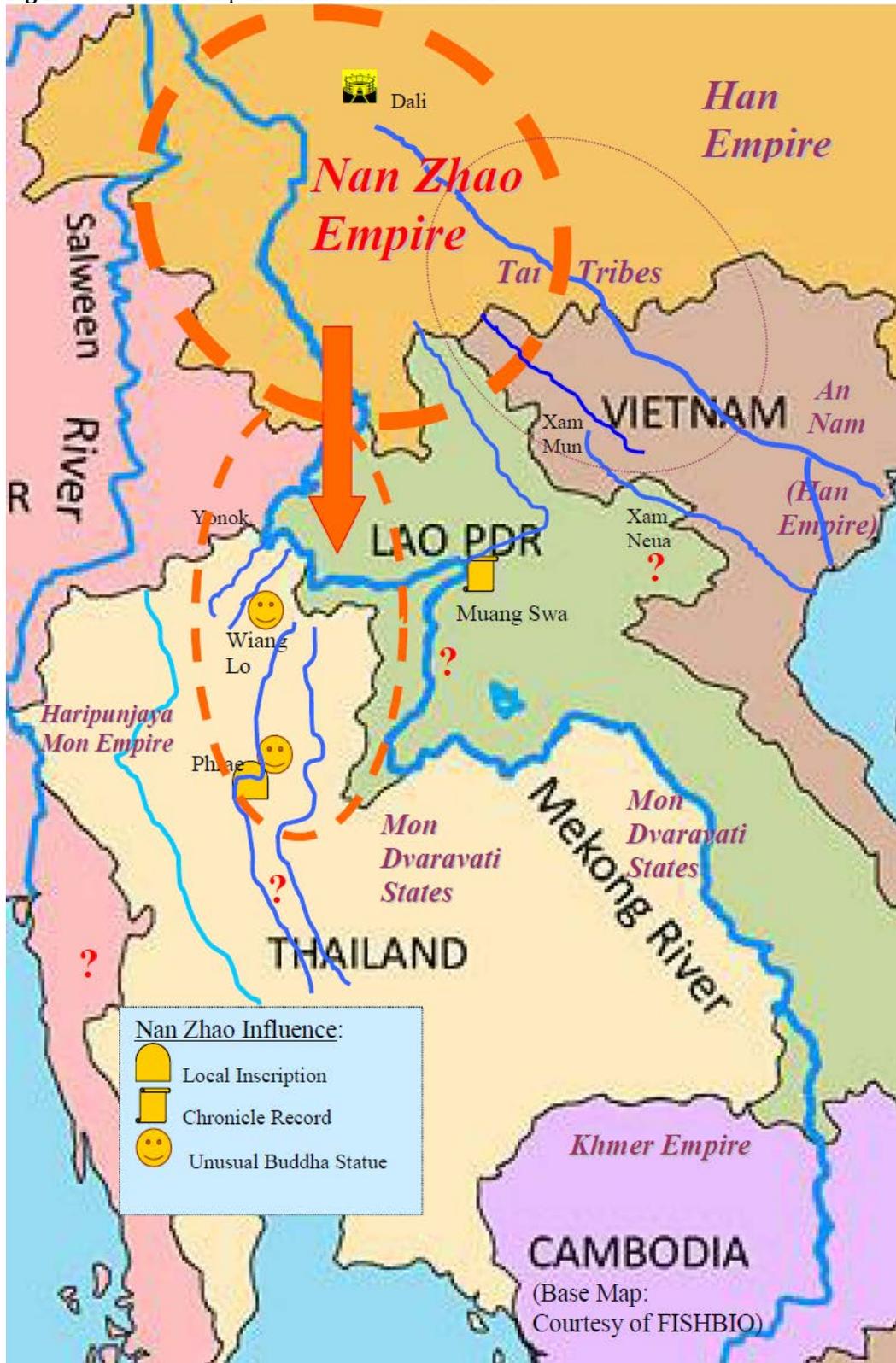


Statue in Wiang Lo Museum, Wat (Photo by Hue Nhu Nguyen)



Statue in Wat Luang, Phra (Photo of Museum Photo, by Hue Nhu Nguyen)

Figure 3: Nan Zhao Expansion into Thailand and Laos



Re-Examining the Legends (Oral Histories and Chronicles of the Lao and Tai) and Comparison to Nan Zhao Records

Though legends and chronicles do not appear to ever to use the name “Nan Zhao”, there seem to be enough corroborating details to link them with its leaders and to present a picture of an empire in northern Thailand and Laos that is much larger than the evidentiary record. Although this history seems to have been used to try to suggest that it was actually Tai peoples spreading, either independently of Nan Zhao or linked with it, it seems that later Tai migrations may simply have been confused with or sought to redefine this earlier history. There are explanations for why Tai peoples would remember or worship Nan Zhao kings and see them as relevant to their own history but there is no strong linkage of this history to any Tai groups of that period.

As with the Chinese and Nan Zhao texts that are accessible to most scholars today only through tertiary sources given the high degree of specialization needed to read ancient Chinese and Nan Zhao writing, interpreting chronicles of Lao and Thai history that are available in mostly 16th century palm leaf manuscripts in ancient Lao and Thai, also requires a reliance on secondary and tertiary sources, given the specialization required to read them. That introduces a number of opportunities for error and distortion that only a large team of scholars, working together, could reasonably claim to overcome. Interpretation here relies on a number of presentations by scholars in English translation as well as some more general presentations in history books and museum exhibits. Among the sources relied on for the different chronicles for Chiang Saen and Chiang Rai in northern Thailand, and Luang Nam Tha, Luang Prabang, and Xieng Khouang in Laos, and areas of overlap, are those of a variety of archaeologists and historians, with their interpretations (Finot, 1917; Grabowski and Wichasin, 2008; Chiemsisouraj, 2011; Noy Insong Kalignavong, undated; Chao Noi, undated; Stuart-Fox, 1997; Sarassawadee, 2005; Ngaosrivathanas, 2008; Kaignavongsa and Fincher, 1993; Karlstrom, 2009).

Linking the Chronicles to Nan Zhao through Nan Zhao Kings: Although there is some dispute among scholars as to whether the various chronicles actually name Nan Zhao kings, the majority of scholars seem to recognize Khun Bulom (with various spellings, including “Borom”), considered the ancestral king of the Tai-Lao, as Pi-luo-ge (from the Chinese character spelling), the fourth Nan Zhao king in Nan Zhao and Chinese records, said to have ruled from 728 to 748 C.E. It is possible that at least two of the leaders who show up in various chronicles are also among the 13 Nan Zhao kings, including Khun Bulom’s son, Khun Lo (Ge-luo-feng), and Luo Cheng, the second Nan Zhao king, ruling from 674 – 712. Some of the reluctance to see the Tai “ancestors” as actually Nan Zhao kings, who were most likely not Tai, may reflect a desire to see a separate Tai kingdom rising independently, even though there is no historical record to confirm it. Table 2 presents the list of Nan Zhao kings and their dates of rule, in the first two columns (Backus, 1981) along with the potential linkages.

<i>Nan Zhao Ruler (Transliteration of Chinese)</i>	<i>Period of Rule</i>	<i>Correlative in Lao and Northern Tai Chronicles</i>
1. Xi-nu-luo	649 - 674	?
2. Luo-cheng (son of above)	674 - 712	Lao Cheng/ Lao Chok in Chronicles of Chiang Saen Chueang/ Chet Chueang/ Jet Huang in the Chronicles of Xieng Khouang in 698?
3. Sheng-luo-pi (son of above)	712 - 728	?
4. Pi-luo-ge (son of above)	728 - 748	Khun Bulom/ Khun Borom in Chronicles of Lao history
5. Ge-luo-feng (son of above)	748 - 778	Khun Lo/ Khun Lor, son of Khun Bulom in Chronicles of Luang Prabang
6. Yi-mou-xun (grandson of above)	778 - 808	?
7. Xun-ge-quan (son of above)	808 - 809	?
8. Quan-long-sheng (son of above)	809 - 816	?
9. Quan-li-sheng (younger brother of above)	816 - 823	?
10. Feng-you (younger brother of above)	823 - 859	?
11. Shi-long (son of above)	859 - 877	?
12. Long-shun (son of above)	877 - 897	?
13. Shun-hua-zhen (son of above)	897 - 902	?

(Note that the sons' names generally take on the name of the father as the first syllable of their names, with the exception of Feng-you and Shi-long.)

The first linkage presented on the table, that of Nan Zhao King Luo-cheng as the Lao Cheng (also called Lao Chok) in the Chiang Saen chronicles is the author's speculation based on the presentation of Lao Cheng/ Lao Chok as an area ruler, mentioned in both the Chiang Saen and Chiang Rai museums and in Chiang Khong, on the Mekong, as the king of the area of Yuan or Juan (shown on the maps as "Yonok" another name for the area) around the "Golden Triangle" where Myanmar, Laos and Thailand meet and the Mekong River bends. The kingdom of Yuan is said to have extended from Yunnan (some sources have Lao Cheng coming down the small Mae Sai River that empties into the Mekong, rather than all the way down the Mekong itself) down through Chiang Saen and Chiang Khong and to have been founded in 701. This is perfectly consistent with the time of Luo Cheng's rule, 674 - 712. It is also consistent with the evidence of the Nan Zhao in Phrae, a century later, and with the history presented in Phrae that the Nan Zhao came through Yonok. It is also consistent with the dates given for further travel down the Mekong to Muang Swa/ Luang Prabang in 707 or later, 757 C.E. Yet, there is no mention in the museums that Lao Cheng might be a Nan Zhao king. In fact, he is described as the king of the Lawa people, the people believed to be indigenous to the area who may have been Mon and are not Tai.

The reason given as to why there is no corroborating evidence of this kingdom here (with the center said to have been called Nakhon Ngoen Yang), is that the center is said to have disappeared in an earthquake and fallen under water (possibly the Chiang Saen Lake/ Nong Bong Kaii, or perhaps an area around Souvanna Khoum Kham in the Mekong, itself).

Another chronicle that may be directly linked to this time period is that of Xieng Khouang, well to the east of here and probably best accessible on rivers from the Mekong going east, south of Muang Swa/ Luang Prabang. Although there are different versions of the

chronicle, one interpretation by an archaeologist is that two brothers from Chiang Rai (then called Suan Tan) attacked Xieng Khouang, the area of the Plain of Jars, then called Muang Pakan (Karlstrom, 2009). Thao Hung was the ruler of Suan Tan and his brother, Thao Chueang, became the ruler of Xieng Khouang after killing the local ruler, Thao Kua. Karlstrom dates this story as at 698 C.E. This would also be during the reign of Lao Cheng. Is Thao Chueang (or perhaps Thao Hung) actually Lao Cheng?⁵ Some linguists think that Hung and Cheung are equivalent in area languages (Chamberlain, 1972, 1998). The dating here is a bit early for the time of reported Nan Zhao control of Muang Sua (707 or 757 C.E.). Interestingly, on the Vietnamese side of the border, across from Xieng Khouang, the story is somewhat transformed and may occur two centuries later, at the fall of Nan Zhao, with a link to Khun Bulom and the Nan Zhao as militarizing the Tai peoples in their center in Son La, east of Dien Bien Phu (described below in the explanation of how Tai peoples see Khun Bulom and the Nan Zhao).

While the Luang Prabang chronicle and other Lao chronicles seem to mention Khun Bulom, he seems to just appear without any clear origin and apparently only a link to Nan Zhao in the stories of Luang Prabang, though this may only be an interpretation in tertiary sources. These chronicles usually describe his rule as 25 years, teaching the early Tai peoples to use unspecified new tools and arts, though the Chinese records have Pi-luo-ge ruling for only 20 years.

The real focus of the several chronicles that mention Khun Bulom is not on him in particular but on his supposed nine sons, including Khun Lo, who is said to have ruled over Muang Swa, and the geographic areas of rule of the other sons (below). Pi-luo-ge's first son, who became king of Nan Zhao, is Ge-luo-feng. Some say that Luo-Feng is Lo, but here is where there are disputes, starting with the fact that Ge-luo-Feng would have ruled in Dali, not as far south as Muang Swa. The only really consistent explanation here is that the "sons" may be grandsons or some other lineage than one directly including Ge-luo-Feng.

It is easy to see how "Pi-luo-ge" is heard as Bulom but not how "Ge-luo-feng" simply becomes Lo. The chronicle in Yonok that has Khun Bulom's second son, Chaiyapongse Singhonawat, ruling over the area in 773, at the age of 18, is a logical impossibility since he would have been born in 755 while Pi-luo-ge is believed to have died in 750 (and perhaps earlier since his rule ended in 748) (Schlesinger, 2001, likely citing the Phongsawadan Yonok of 1899, compiling various Northern Thai chronicles).

If Chaiya Pongse is actually the Phraya Pol described in Phrae as the founder of that town in 828 C.E., some 55 years later, this is really four generations after Pi-luo-ge and during the reign of either Quan-li-sheng or Feng-you, both brothers of the previous king Quan-long-sheng.

If Khun Bulom and Khun Lo were not really Nan Zhao leaders but were local Tai leaders, there would likely be more information about them than is found in the chronicles, but there is none. Even their names would likely be associated with meanings in Tai languages rather than just transliterations from a Nan Zhao (Tibeto-Burman) language. For

⁵ There are now various contradictory claims in oral history that have widely varying dates as is typical of oral history. Khun or Phaya Chueang is a cultural hero (in many Thai and Lao chronicles) referring to the 11th/12th century. According to Volker Grabowsky, he is considered by the Tai Lue as the founder of their kingdom (12th century). Terwiel (1978) and Chamberlain (1989) even suggest that the Nung ruler Nong Zhi-gao (11th century) was the prototype of the Khun Chueang myth.

example, one possible Tai/Lao interpretation of Bulom would be “Phu” (or “Phou”) (“mountain”) and “Lom” (“wind”) but there is no such ancestral place in the reputed ancestral area of the Tai at the time (the area of “Thaeng”, around Dien Bien Phu). Nor does there appear to be any significance of Khun Lo (“wheel”).

The Legendary Geography of Nan Zhao as Presented in Chronicles

Different chronicles provide a general geography of areas related to “Khun Bulom” but none have any consistent linkages to Tai peoples.

The founding of Nan Zhao itself is described as a unification of six different kingdoms by 729, including the central kingdom around Dali and five other “zhao” (distinctly not the Tai word, “mueang” for kingdom, and referring to the five “chao” or rulers of those kingdoms) of Mengxi, Yuexi, Langqiong, Dengdan and Shilang, probably all in Yunnan.

The key to the geography of the area of northern Thailand and Laos during this era is the naming of seven areas said to have been ruled by seven “sons” of Khun Bulom, including Khun Lo (ruling over Muang Swa) and Khun Phongse/ Saiphol/ Kham Phong ruling over an area on the south side of the Mekong around Chiang Saen and Chiang Rai. Since the chronicles were written much later, probably around the 14th to 16th centuries, it is very difficult to ascertain the boundaries or names of the areas during the 9th century. Three of the seven areas were probably outside the current Thai and Lao borders or crossed them: the “Shan” area around the Myanmar border just north of Thailand and “Yunnan” that could be northern Laos and the Chinese border, and the Sipsong Panna (Sip Song Panna) area that is probably the area of the Mekong around Laos, Myanmar and part of Yunnan. Another area crosses the Vietnamese border, including the northeastern Laos area of Hua Phan and Thanh Hoa. The two others are given as “Ayuthaya” which is probably the area of Lavo/Lopburi and maybe part of the Yom River, and Muang Phuan/Xieng Khouang

Note that not only is there no mention of any of these leaders or areas being “Tai” but the seven areas do not include the traditional/historical Red River Tai area. At best, the area of Dien Bien Phu, that is said to be the Tai center at the time, is either outside of the map or just barely a part of it. It is possible that the historical Red River area of the Tai (described in some sources as “Cuan”) may have been difficult for Nan Zhao to conquer since they contested it with China, also up until just before the attacks on the Han down the Red River starting in 861 C.E.

An attempt is made in Figure 4 to place all of these different areas on the same geographical map used earlier. On this map, the boundaries are only rough estimates but they serve to show a contiguous area south of the Nan Zhao center in Yunnan. Four of these seven areas (if “Yunnan” is included) are clearly within the areas for which there seems to be an evidentiary record, with three of them directly within the cluster of rivers south of the Mekong. The others seem to fill in the historical record where other sources raise speculation of the presence of Nan Zhao.

Although other chronicles do not continue the history of these geographic areas, they do provide some additional information. For example, the Luang Tha Chronicles explain that when Khun Lo attacked Muang Swa, the previous leader, Khun Kang Hang (again, of unknown ethnicity) fled to the town of Vieng Phouka (about 200 km south of Luang Nam Tha, and similarly north of the Mekong), where there is a small citadel.

The chronicles of Chiang Saen provide a perspective on the unity of this whole region but the information is hard to interpret. From the perspective of Chiang Saen, this

entire region of seven provinces may have been referred to as Singhanavati (“Lion Kingdom”), though the Lao chronicles seem to call it “Lam Thong”, a term that is not translated (perhaps a reference to “Water” and “Bronze”). According to this version, around 757 C.E., Khun Saiphong led a group from northern Myanmar across the Salween River to this region. In 773 they built or rebuilt the town of Nagabundhu-Singhanavatinagorn, which may be the rebuilt Nakhon Ngoen Yang, in or near the current site of Chiang Saen (perhaps the mountain area just to the south of Chiang Saen, known today as Vieng Prukha). There are no remains of Nan Zhao reported here.

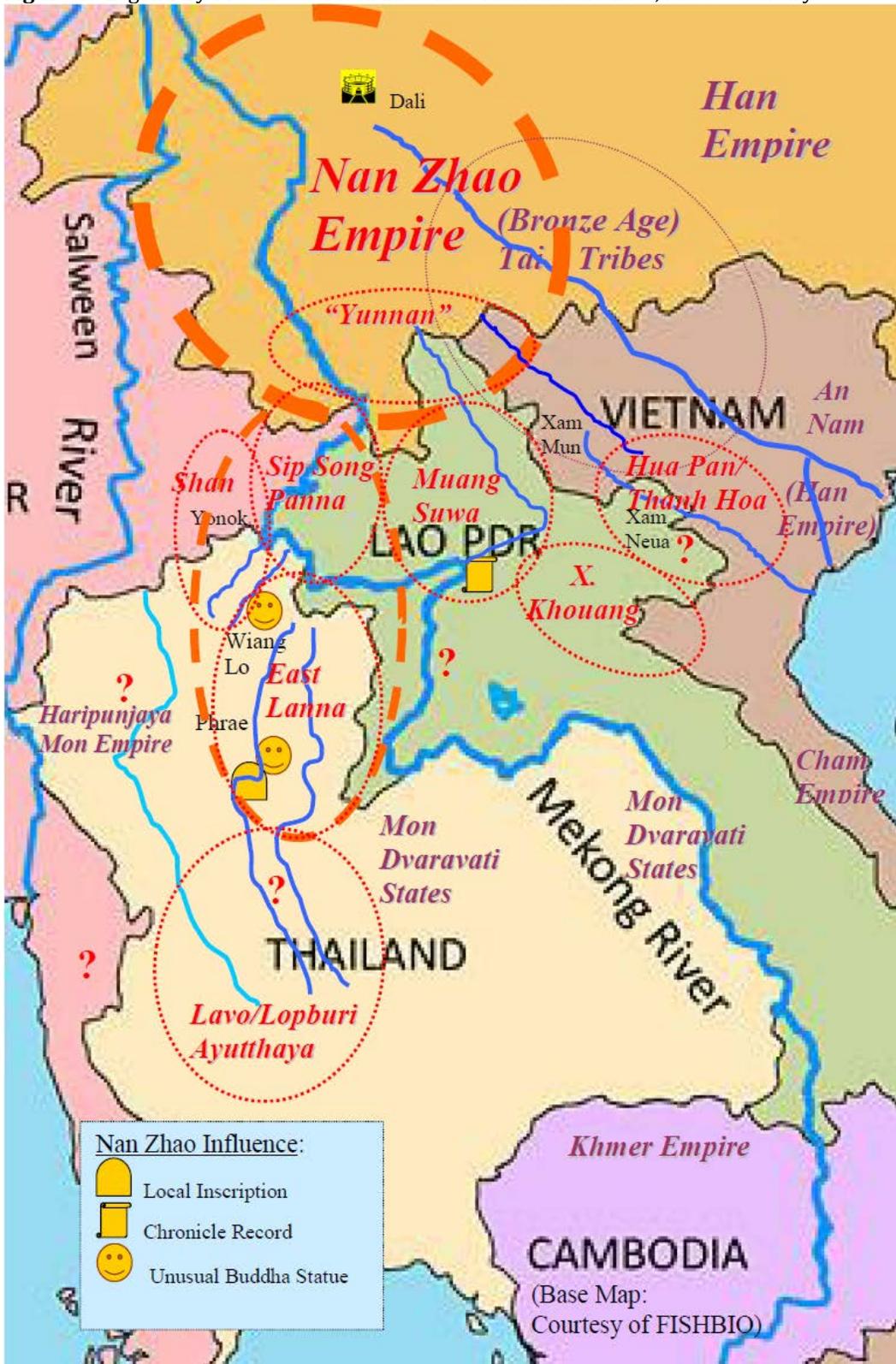
In the version of the Chiang Rai cultural center that is set a century earlier, the 7th century was an era of mass immigration and development here under a king, Chao Singhanawati Kuman, the son of Pra Chao Dheivatai (possibly Thewathai⁶), who brought 100,000 families to Naga Phanthu Singanawat Nakhon/ Yonok Naga Nakhon. It is not clear if this is the same story as the one of Khun Saiphong and it could potentially be an earlier story of the Mon Haripunjaya settlement of this area and then either abandoning it or losing it to Nan Zhao. If the movement occurred under Nan Zhao, no explanation is given for the source of the migration, the actual settlements, the reason for them, or the impact on the peoples who are already in the area (said to be “Khom” but possibly Mon, Lawa, and Khmu).

A version that is more consistent with the Nan Zhao timeline is that “Lao Kiang”, the ninth king of Hiran, founded the city of Ngoenyang (modern Chiang Saen) around 850 AD, moved the capital there, and thus became the first King of Ngoenyang. On the other hand, this “Lao Kiang” sounds very much like Lao Cheng (or perhaps the early Nan Zhao King Luo Cheng), which again introduces confusion.

The continuation of the Chiang Saen and Chiang Rai chronicles of Singhanavati mention a series of battles over an as yet unidentified city called “Umongasela” that is believed to be around the Thai and Myanmar border, north of Chiang Mai, around the start of the Ping River. The battles are described as with the “Khmer” but a look at maps for this period, like Figure 4, suggests that Nan Zhao would have been engaged in a series of battles with the Ping River empire of Haripunjaya, attacking it from the east (and taking territories like Phrae) and probably also trying to attack it from the north and maybe the south. Haripunjaya probably withstood these attacks with major battles at the source of the Ping River at this “Umongkhaasela” that may long ago have been destroyed.

⁶ This is the suggestion of Volker Grabowsky.

Figure 4: Legendary Provinces of Nan Zhao into Thailand and Laos, late 9th Century



Anthropological and Historical Explanations for Tai Worship of Nan Zhao Leaders and Distortion of Nan Zhao History as “Tai” History: There is a contemporary yearning among the Siamese and the Lao to find some linkage to the Buddhist Nan Zhao empire that would either place them on or near their current territories and/or show that animist Tai groups were already introduced to Buddhism in the 8th or 9th century, rather than only in the 13th and 14th centuries by the conquered Mon peoples (and adopted by Tai leaders as a way of controlling the Mon). Nevertheless, it is highly possible that the 8th and 9th century Tai peoples were only peripheral to Nan Zhao and that their descendants today link themselves with the Nan Zhao and its leaders like Khun Bulom because they inherited its lands where others remembered them, followed Nan Zhao’s practices, and benefitted from Nan Zhao’s opposition to common enemies.

In the chronicles west/south of the Mekong in Thailand, the key figure in this historic period is Lao Cheng, then Khun Bulom, while to the east, in Laos, it is Khun Bulom. Peoples on the land who survived into the 14th to 16th century to record chronicles remembered this strong empire and the kings whose armies controlled these areas. In the area of Chiang Saen, they were said to be Lawa peoples who ultimately intermarried with the Tai Yuan coming from the north and who came to establish the Lanna empire and write the history. A similar process seems to have occurred in Luang Prabang.

The memory of strong kings in a place, even without a direct ethnic or genetic connection is not unusual in the region since people associate themselves with power and symbols. The early 8th century King in Ha Noi, Mai Hac De (literally, the “Black Emperor”) who defeated the Han and established local rule for several years is considered a hero in Viet Nam even though the Nan Zhao king who also led an army to take Ha Noi from the Chinese, a century later, is not. Mai Hac De may have been Cham or perhaps Mon and he led local tribes against the Chinese, including many Vietnamese who allied with him. Similarly, whether or not they were under the Nan Zhao or allies, the Tai tribes would have seen an ally in the Nan Zhao kings who fought the Chinese. In Vientiane, today, the city name remains allied with a founder from around the 5th century, Buri-Chan, who is said to have built the city’s canals. This author believes he may have represented the Gupta Empire, building the That Luang as terraced temple for Hindu worship (Ngaosrivathanas, 2008; Lempert, n.p.6).

If the Tai peoples saw the Han as a threat to them, which they certainly did since the time of Dong Son, with the Red River attacks on Co Loa by the Han, they could have seen Nan Zhao as saving them from Han rule and assimilation. Nan Zhao attacks into China in the “Cuan” area of eastern Yunnan, around Kunming and north of the Red River, could have protected Tai autonomy for a century, and the attacks on Tong Binh/ Hanoi would have also subdued the influence of the Han empire coming at them from the southeast.

An alternative explanation for the recognition of Khun Bulom, that is suggested by either chronicles or reinterpretations in the Tai areas of Viet Nam, is that the Nan Zhao royal family in 902 may have fled into minority areas when the Nan Zhao empire was finally destroyed by the Chinese, and then established some kind of local rule and relations. That would not have been recorded.

In addition to Xam Mun in Dien Bien Phu and the areas of Muang Tam and Oi Nu nearby, there is another area in Viet Nam that Tai peoples also recognize as their ancestral center. It is Muong Lo, around Nghia Lo town in the province of Yen Bai, just south of Son La, about 120 km due east of Dien Bien Phu. It is midway between the Da and Red Rivers, about 200 km from Ha Noi.

In the story here, the Thao Hung and Thao Chueang who attacked Xieng Khouang (in the Lao version, described above and dated to 698 C.E.) are named Tao Ngan and Tao Suong. They are not identified as coming from the area of Chiang Rai but directly down the Da River from Yunnan, with the implication that it was when Nan Zhao was being defeated by the Chinese. The idea here is that they are migrating royalty rather than just a conquering army from Nan Zhao. Then the narrative abruptly shifts to an undefined date. In this version, it is one of Khun Bulom's grandsons who is one of Khun Lo's sons (here, Khun Lo is called Thao Lo), who goes to Dien Bien Phu to establish the Tai center there of Thaen (here called Muang Thanh). The implication is not that the Nan Zhao were Tai or that Muang Swa was a Tai area and that they were moving to a "Tai center" but that the Tai peoples were being "modernized" into the ways of the Nan Zhao empire. The role of Buddhism is not made clear.

Even if the story of Thao Chueang/ Tao Suong has just been garbled in the Vietnamese version, the version of the Khun Lo story makes it clear that the areas the Tai and Lao recognize as their ancestral centers were outside of the areas ruled by the seven "sons" of Khun Bulom, as depicted in Figure 4. In this story, the Tai area does come under Nan Zhao but it is established by Muang Suwa and it is at least two generations after Khun Bulom. That seems to coincide with the history of this area only coming under Nan Zhao in the 9th century, before the attacks on Tong Binh (Ha Noi) down the Red River.

According to the history here, it was not until the 11th century that Tai peoples began to move out of this center (Nghia Lo area) into the areas where they are now found in Southeast Asia. This story also seems to reinforce the idea that the Tai were a small group, concentrated in this area, and not moved to various locations during the Nan Zhao era.

It is certainly possible that the Nan Zhao elites married into Tai groups to establish blood relations but there is no mention of that in any chronicles or in legends of any princesses or local leaders. It is also possible that the armies the Nan Zhao raised would have drawn peoples from various minorities and included the Tai or that Tai peoples were identified for a particular caste or profession in the empire and moved to serve in a particular role, including that of slaves, but there does not seem to be any information on this in chronicles.

It is hard to find any logical reason why groups of Tai peoples would have been moved in the Nan Zhao empire, including in the areas of Lam Thong/Singhanavati. Reasons for population relocations within the empires of Southeast Asia have included:

- Bringing specialized labor of a rival empire and the palace harem to an imperial center (found almost universally and including in the Nan Zhao conquests over Chengdu and the Pyu);
- Moving manual labor for construction (e.g., moving Lao workers to construct Bangkok in the late 18th and early 19th century);
- Depopulation of an area to create a buffer zone (e.g., the Siamese depopulating the Mekong area to create a buffer with Viet Nam);
- Breaking up an existing empire to destroy identities (e.g., the Siamese and the Khmer); and
- Replacing people killed in war and genocide/scorched earth tactics (the repopulation of northern Thailand after Taksin).

None of these apply to the disorganized Tai tribes.

Peoples in the region also moved extensively to avoid invasion (from the Mongols in the 12th century and from the Haw armies from China heading through Laos in the 19th century) and in the face of famines, but this also did not characterize the Nan Zhao era.

Discussion

It is interesting that even with so little direct information about the Nan Zhao in Laos and Thailand and with barely even a mention of the empire in history that a picture can emerge simply by looking at what is not said and examining neighboring areas during the time period of the mid 7th to the beginning of the 10th century.

There are still major holes in trying to connect the actual evidence with the picture that emerges from chronicles and in areas on the edges of Nan Zhao, particularly with respect to the location and history of Tai peoples during this era. It is unclear exactly where Nan Zhao met Tai groups and what the relation was, other than from the stories of Nghia Lo, possibly in the mid-9th century. It is also not clear where Tai peoples were located between the bronze age and the era of Nan Zhao, including where they might have been along the Red River or Mekong.

In the 10th century, specific Tai identities began to form as Tai groups began moving throughout the region. Did they move as a result of the fall of Nan Zhao, copying its form as an empire? Were they filling the power vacuum left by Nan Zhao and by the weaknesses of the Chinese Han at the time, taking over areas the way the Mon did after the Gupta and weakening of the Khmer? Apparently, this is the real impact of Nan Zhao in paving the way for several small Tai empires to emerge in almost miniature versions. The 10th and 11th centuries were eras in which Viet Nam also broke away from China, so this was an era of opportunity for the emergence of small empires, with the centers weakened.

How far did Nan Zhao really move southwards in Thailand and in Laos? What explains the claim in Nan Zhao chronicles that they came up against Chen La, when it had already fallen? Since there does not seem to be any evidence that Nan Zhao moved further down the Mekong than Muang Swa, they either viewed Muang Swa as the extent of Khmer influence that perhaps they still found in some form or the Khmer had extended farther up the Mekong than anyone has been able to previously record. (The Ngaosrivathanas found evidence of an early Khmer temple in Luang Prabang (2008) but this author has discounted the rough lingas and their attributions of Khmer influence any further than that (Lempert, n.p.1). Perhaps Nan Zhao did move well down the Yom River all the way into the area of Lavo/Lopburi and considered that area as Khmer. But if they were in Phrae in 828, the Khmer should have been long gone from the Thai coast at that time. On the other hand, the return of the Khmer to Isan in the early Angkorian era did not start until Jayavarman III in 866, the time that the Han were repelling the Nan Zhao invasion of Tong Binh/ Ha Noi and the Khmer did not attack Lopburi until 1002.

In Xieng Khouang, there is some speculation that the brick towers in Muang Phuan may have dated all the way to the era of the Cham, though there is no evidence of this other than suggestion of trade routes between Xieng Khouang and the Sa Huynh (pre-Cham) early in the first millennium. The possibility of Nan Zhao presence in Xieng Khouang and Thanh Hoa, with river access towards the sea leads to speculation again on possible relations with the Cham during this era but also with zero evidence. In Nghe An, in Viet Nam, along the Lam River, is a strange ruined brick tower, the Nhan Thap, where some strange Buddha statues were found and reported a century ago (Le Breton, 2001). Its dating as 5th – 6th century is more than a century before Nan Zhao. Nevertheless, if Mai Hac De in the early 8th century

was drawing on local tribes for his attack on Tong Binh/ Ha Noi from the borders with Nghe An into what is now Laos, it is possible that the Nan Zhao did put pressure on the Cham in this area. The area was a border area of the Cham and Han Chinese at the time.

Conclusion

Despite the lack of physical evidence from and information about the Nan Zhao period in Thailand and Laos and the mistaken attempts to define it as Tai, the period plays a significant role in the history of Tai groups for several reasons and existing evidence needs to be considered in a new light.

Immediately following the Nan Zhao period and probably as a result both of the power vacuum left by the fall of Nan Zhao and by the advantages of learning from it, Tai military kingdoms immediately began to rise and spread throughout areas that had been under Nan Zhao control and beyond. Though they had been animist, many of these Tai kingdoms also followed the Nan Zhao example of adopting Buddhism as an apparent means of social control that was not at all inconsistent with imperialism and war. Moreover, these Tai populations began to grow, possibly as a result of borrowed agricultural or organizational practices, though what these are is still not clear. While the Tai peoples seemed to be only peripheral in Nan Zhao and not on major routes of conquest or migration (down the major rivers from Yunnan) and did not appear to be converted to Buddhism or to move much beyond areas that were probably around northwestern Viet Nam and not in the areas of Thailand or Laos, they still seem to have learned from the Nan Zhao and benefitted from Nan Zhao's legacy.

It seems clear why both the Siamese and the Lao have invested in the mythology of Nan Zhao that presents the early Tai as part of the Nan Zhao empire, either victims of its control or important allies (some suggestions are even that they formed a military class!), moving into territories of Laos and Thailand as early as the 8th century and even adopting Buddhism. These stories are important to the Siamese and Lao mythologies for a number of reasons. Not only do they create a claim to the lands of Thailand and Laos that is some five centuries earlier and establish ties to Buddhism that were also five centuries earlier than the reality.

- For the Sukhothai kingdom, they also help dispel the likely reality that Siamese culture developed directly from the Lao, travelling from the area of Dien Bien Phu on the Ou River to Muang Swa/ Luang Prabang in the 10th century and then down the Mekong into Thailand around the 12th century. The Siamese would much prefer to present a history that eliminates the role of the Lao and establishes their arrival in Sukhothai independent of the Lao migrations.

- For both the Lao and the Siamese, presenting themselves as both victims of empire and peace loving Buddhists is also preferable to what the actual history of Nan Zhao and its aftermath suggests: that Tai peoples were in fact militaristic opportunists, copying from the Nan Zhao and the Chinese and taking advantage of regional weaknesses of other peoples whom they exploited, while using Buddhism as part of a military strategy. Rather than being peace loving or developed, the picture that emerges is one of a people with no technological or moral superiority, adopting a religion (Buddhism) that actually promoted militarism, stratification and social control.

Although there is little evidence of Nan Zhao architecture, agriculture or other scientific advance, or art in the areas they controlled in Thailand and Laos, it seems likely that they left both a cultural and genetic legacy. Even if the ruling elite and/or the populace of Nan Zhao were not Tai and the areas they controlled were later taken over by Tai the fact that their legacy continues in chronicles in the names of leaders selects that in some ways their descendants may have remained on the land. Something in the chronicles also continues to resonate with local identity: Buddhism, militarism, control of rivers, distinctions of local peoples as different from the Han Chinese and Vietnamese, and possibly other practices and traditions, including possibly the adaptation of Nan Zhao laws (Ngaosyvathn, 2006).

Given the role that Nan Zhao plays in regional chronicles and mythology it is likely that there is in fact much more physical and cultural evidence of the period in Thailand and Laos that is simply misrepresented, overlooked, or suppressed. Perhaps with a shift in perspective brought by re-examination of this period, some of that evidence will be seen in a new light and will be “re-discovered”.

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