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China as the Place of Origin of the Lai

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Abstract

Known as 'Chin' in Myanmar, 'Pawi' in India and 'Bawm' in Bangladesh, the Lai people form a prominent and significant group among the Kuki-Lushai-Chin peoples of Myanmar, India, and Bangladesh. Their origin is however a mystery. A general believe among the people is that they came from China.

Keywords

Lai, Chin, Pawi, place of origin, China, Li, Ch'iang, 'Lairam', Middle Kingdom Complex.

Introduction

The Lai people inhabit the Chin State of Myanmar, the Indian state of Mizoram, and the Chittagong Division of Bangladesh. Besides the three areas of concentration of their population mentioned here, the Lai are also found in other parts of Myanmar, India, and Bangladesh. They are known as 'Chin' in Myanmar, 'Pawi' in India, and 'Bawm' in Bangladesh.

In spite of the absence of an established theory regarding the place of origin of the Lai, there is a general belief among the Lai people that their forefathers once lived in China. There are some evidences which suggest that China could be the original homeland of the Lais. This paper attempts to establish that the Lai people originated from China.

Lai State or Lai Kingdom of ancient China

There existed a Lai state or Lai Kingdom in ancient China from 722 BC to 481 (or 538) BC. Lai state was a monarchy, ruled by a monarch, and was a large territory (Wikipedia, Lai state, 2020; Wiki Lai surname, 2020).¹ The Lai state was located in today's Henan Province, or Shandong Province in Central-eastern China. Let it be noted that Henan and Shandong were the birth place of the great Chinese civilization.

There were Four Barbarians in Han Chinese culture, such as, the Northern Di or Beidi (Northern Barbarian), the Southern Man (Southern Barbarians), and the Western Rong or Xirong (Western Barbarians), and the Dongyi or Eastern Yi (Eastern Barbarians). Lai belonged to the Dongyi or Eastern Yi barbarian group (Wikipedia, Four Barbarians, 2020; Wikipedia, Dongyi, 2020). They were mentioned in some ancient Chinese texts as perhaps related to the people of the Chinese civilization (Cosmo, 2020: 108-112).

The brother of Zhou Wu Wang, Shu Ying, was awarded the duke of Lai (north east of Shi in Henan). In 538 BC, the Lai kingdom was destroyed by Chu Ling Wang (Chu state). Most of its people fled to the neighbouring kingdoms of Luo and Fu (in the south), and many changed their name to Luo and Fu in order to escape persecution. Others migrated north and settled in Da Yan (Yanling in Henan). They adopted the last name of Lai to commemorate their old kingdom. Because of this, the Lais, the Fus and the Luos are closely related (Chinese culture homepage, Lai names, 2020; Academic, Lai surname, 2020).

There are many people in China and elsewhere in the world today (Taiwan, Philippines, Korea, Indonesia, Singapore, Hong Kong, etc) that adopt Lai as their surnames. The meaning of the character used in the *Lai surname* in Chinese is "depend on; trust in; rely on" (Lai surname, 2020; Chinese-English translation 'lai', 2020).

Lai is the 98th most common last name in China today. Examples of people adopting Lai surname are: *Zhou Enlai* or *Chau En Lai* (1898--1976, the first Premier or Prime Minister of China), Han Dynasty --Lai Xian (judge), Song Dynasty -- Lai Wenjin (geologist), Yuan Dynasty - Lai Liang (poet), Ming Dynasty - Lai Ying (judge), Qing Dynasty - Lai Zhen, and Lai Jin (painters), Lai Ta (general), Lai Ruoyu (Governor of Shanxi province, China from 1951 to 1952), Lai Ching-te, also known by his English name William Ching-te Lai (prominent politician from Taiwan), Pinky Lai (Car designer; ex-chief designer with Porsche AG), etc.

Lai is the 154th most frequently occurring surname on a global scale, held by around 1 in 2,034 people. It occurs predominantly in Asia, where 98 percent of Lai are found; 88 percent are found in East Asia and 88 percent are found in Sinic Asia. Lai is also the 2,436th most commonly held first name in the world, held by 426,910 people. The surname Lai is most commonly held in China, where it is borne by 2,695,815 people, or 1 in 507. Aside from China Lai exists in 149 countries. It also occurs in Taiwan, where 8 percent reside and Hong Kong, where 4 percent (Surnames lai, 2020).²

Then there are Lai hotels, Lai clinics, etc in China, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, etc.

Though it is difficult to prove, at the moment, that the people of the ancient Lai state are ancestors of the Lais now living in Myanmar, India, Bangladesh, etc., it is quite significant that a state or kingdom bearing the name of an ethnic group known as Lai now living in Myanmar, India and Bangladesh existed once upon a time in China. And that there is a prominent clan, Lai clan, today in China and around the world.

It is quite probable that the Lais of today Myanmar, India and Bangladesh are direct descendants of the ancient people of the Lai Kingdom in China. The former continue to bear 'Lai' as their group name through ages, from China to their present settlements in the three countries of Myanmar, India and Bangladesh. If we do not find people known as 'Lai' among the official list of 55 "minority nationalities" in today's China, it would be because of centuries of persecution, assimilation and marginalization. It was already mentioned earlier that the Lais of ancient China were driven to the south, and persecution have led to loss of their ethnic identity such as surname 'Lai'. It is also possible that the descendants of ancient Lai state are still living in today's south China a part of "unidentified" ethnic groups (*China--Facts & Figures, 1987*).

Perhaps, smaller tribes of modern China living in the south such as the Li people living in Hainan island and elsewhere in China, and others are descendants of the people of ancient Lai kingdom, pushed by a stronger group to the south and elsewhere, as noted already.

Lai or Li people of south China as ancestors of Lai?

Richard K. Diao mentions that there are sub-nationalities under Li nationality such as B'lai, K'lai, Loi, etc in various southern provinces of China viz: Hainan island, Kwangtung, Kwangsichuang, Yuannan, and Hunan (Diao in Kunstadter 1967: 155).

"Li" is the Chinese transcription of their native name, which is "Lai" or "Hlai". The Lai people of Hainan are a Kra - Dai speaking ethnic group. The Kra–Dai languages (also known as Tai–Kadai, Daic and Kadai) are a language family of tonal languages found in Mainland Southeast Asia, southern China, and Northeast India (Ethnologue, 2020; Li people, 2020; Kra-Dai languages, 2020; Multi tree, 2020). Lai language is found as an alternate name of Hlai language as identified by the Ethnologue, 2020 edition. The Ethnologue (2020) also identify Lai, along with Laiu, and Palya, as another alternate name for Bolyu language spoken by people in southern China. While some linguists exclude the Kra-Dai from the Tibet-Burman group of languages, the Chinese linguists include the same within the Tibeto-Burman group.

One cannot ascertain at this juncture if the Lai language, spoken by people in south China is the same as the Lai language spoken by Lai (Pawi) people of India, Bangladesh and Myanmar. Most likely, they would not be the same. Even if they shared common ancestry years ago, centuries of separation would have rendered some variations in their language.

Li is a generic name for the indigenous people of Hainan Island. Also known as the Lai, they live mainly in Hainan Province, on the western part of the island. The Lai population in Hainan Province alone is 1,250,000 in 2020 (Ethnic China, 2020). The Lai or Li people of Hainan Island once lived in mainland China, but were forced by more powerful groups to move to Hainan Island and other parts of south China. Today, Lais (Li) in China are concentrated in Hainan Province but are also living in other southern provinces of China.

Rawkhathak and Ka Ge: Bamboo dance of Lai and Li

It is very interesting to note that the Li or Lai people of China people a folk dance commonly known as bamboo dance or bamboo pole dance³. The cultural root of this Li dance is funeral ceremony (Xie, 2003), just as it is for the Lais in India, etc. In Li dialect, the bamboo dance is known as *Ka Ge*. But the dance is popularly known in Hainan or China as *Dachai Dance*

Among the Kuki-Chin-Lushai people (Lai and its kindred tribes of Manipur, Chin State, Mizoram and Chittagong Hills of Bangladesh) this popular folk dance is widely performed. It is to be noted that the dance originated from the Lai people, and it was performed for funeral ceremony (specifically for the funeral of a departed soul of a woman who died of child birth) as well much like the practice of the Li people. The Lais called it 'Rawkhatlak' (Tribal Research Institute, Pawi History, 1988, 2011: 154-5). Now a day, this dance is never performed for funeral ceremony as the Lai people have become Christians. It is rather performed on occasions such as festivals, public functions, etc. Other tribes of the Kuki-Lushai-Chin group, who would have obviously have learned the bamboo dance from the Lais, could give no cultural significance attached to the origin of the dance which explains that the dance was borrowed from outside the tribe.

Chawngnak Puan and weaving

One very interesting piece of evidence which seems to suggest a connection with the Chinese Civilization is 'Chawngnak Puan' (also cawng-nak), or what is called a Chawngnak Blanket. Used till today by both men and women, mostly by the latter, as a kind of skirt or loongi, a Chawngnak blanket is very costly, one piece costs upwards of Burmese Kyat 600 or US \$ 130 in 1963, according to Lehman (1963,1980: 165).

Elaborately embroidered and multicoloured, it requires a very high degree of artistic skill to weave the blanket. It is made of pure silk though wool is also used nowadays. Chawngnak is easily the number one amongst the Kuki-Chin traditional dresses in terms of technological sophistication, artistic design and skill.

It is possible that the art of weaving and the material (silk) must have been already acquired from China, long before the Lais entered Burma. In ancient times, China was the only country that had silk industry. The technique of making silk was a closely-guarded secret. Silk itself was traded only to royal families, because it was costly, in Europe and later in the East. The fact that the ancestor Lais could afford to weave and wear them indicated the level of their material wellbeing since ancient times. Since they did not have culture of writing, the art of weaving Chawngnak had to be orally and continuously handed down from generations to generations (It may be noted here that Silk Industry was introduced in Burma only as late as 1755: Hardiman, 1901).

Rosaline Varsangzuali in her Ph D thesis, *Evolution of Mizo Dress: A Historical Study* (2017), is quite impressed by the designs of Lai dresses and the skills of the Lai weavers. She finds the two Lai *puan*, or *blankets*, such as *Chawngnak* and *Chanlo* especially remarkable in their intricate and sophisticated designs. She writes, "What is ambiguous is that all these designs whatever their sources may have been are brought to Mizoram in the course of their journey from the Chin Hills to their present domicile; similar designs with comparable motifs are found in different parts of South East Asia, especially among the tribes of Taiwan and SW China. So it is possible that the designs have been imprinted on their brains as they left their old settlements and recreated when they relocated themselves in new places (Varsangzuali, 2017:88).

W.R. Head, Provincial Civil Service and Late Assistant Superintendent, Chin Hills, Burma, in his *Hand Book on the Haka Chin Customs*(1917, on the other hand, said that Lai women introduced patterns into their *puan* only in the 19th century AD, and that silk was procured by the Lais from the Burma (Head, 1917:48). Under the head Blankets (Puan), Head writes, Blankets, of a kind, have been woven for generations, but it is only in the last three (three decades perhaps, author) that pattern shave been introduced into them--the dyeing of the thread was learnt from the Burmans : there is a fable that a woman of Bondwa village, in a dream, learned the art of weaving patterns ; when she awoke, she put this into practice and then taught others. For dyeing purposes, they use lac, which produces a vivid red, and home-grown vegetable dyes : when silk thread is used, it is purchased in skeins from Burma and then dyed to the requisite colour. The raw cotton is cultivated, spun into thread and then dyed this work is all carried out by women" (Head, 1917:48).

Weaving: Lai and Li

Yet another very interesting aspect of the Li tribe of China is their invention of traditional textile weaving techniques. The Li traditional textile techniques, consisting of four: cotton spinning by a hand-twined spinning wheel, traditional dyeing from plants, etc., bamboo loom called Juyao loom used for weaving spindles, and colourful and sophisticated embroidery (Traditional textile techniques of Li minority, 2020). All of these four techniques are more or less the same as the Lai (Pawi) traditional hand weaving techniques

This technique was known only to the Li nationality in the whole of China for a thousand year or so after which it was spread from them to other parts of China. It is said that Daopo, a great woman master of weaving techniques living in late Song Dynasty (960-1279 AD) and early Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368 AD), learned the techniques of Li minority, improved then spread it to other parts of China (Traditional textile techniques of Li minority, 2020).

Since thousands of years ago, Li minority's cotton spinning, dyeing, weaving and embroidering techniques were learned and passed on by all Li's women as one essential skill of living, in addition, it is a kind of tool that Li people could show themselves to the outside world. Li minority have no written characters of their own, so to some extent, Li brocade is their unique historical records, concentrating the history and culture of the Li ethnic minority (Traditional textile techniques of Li minority, 2020).

According to historical records, the traditional spinning and weaving techniques of Li cotton have a history of more than 2,000 years. Since the Han Dynasty (207 BC-220 AD), Li brocade has been offered as a tribute to feudal emperors of later dynasties. Cheng Bingzhao, a poet of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) once praised the exquisite work of Li brocade in these terms: “Li brocade is as beautiful and brilliant as the sun in the sky “. “Li” brocade is appreciated because it is exquisitely manufactured, beautiful in its design, practical, and has the characteristics of the spinning, weaving, dyeing and embroidery of the ethnic group (Qi, 2018).

It is not Chawngnak alone that stands out among all other Kuki- Lushai-Chin traditional textile products. Other textile products of the Lai tribe popularly known as 'Pawi puan' (Lai blanket) in Mizoram, such as Canlo, Maimaw nak, Hnika, Thi-Hni, etc., are without doubt the best in terms of intricate and sophisticated embroidery, artistic designs, quality of fabric, elegant looks, etc., in comparison with their counterpart traditional 'puan' or blankets of the other Kuki- Lushai-Chin traditional textile products.

The art of weaving was not shared by the Li weavers of China with other people still about 10th century AD, by which time the early Lais must have surely left China. It is likely, hence, that the Lais have inherited the techniques of hand weaving, both cotton and silk, long ago in China, from their possible ancestors, the Li tribe of China. The non-Lai tribes of the Kuki-Lushai-Chin must have learned this technique from the Lais after settling in the Chin Hills of Myanmar.

Looking at the different kinds of dresses Lais have for both men and women, it is clear that the people were highly skilled artisans and that their society had attained a fairly high level of cultural development and sophistication.

Way back in 1870s, Hunter said of the Lai dress which he found was “more ample than that of the independent hill tribes” (Hunter, 1876, 1973:65). Lewin told of fine Lai man's garments and of very handsome women`s home spun garments. A Lai woman and man "are distinguished by a decorum in the matter of dress that, from our knowledge of the other tribes, would hardly be expected", Lewin said (Lewin (1870, 1978: 148-9, 162).

And in the words of Lehman, “the elaborately embroidered and multi-colored blankets and skirts, woven exclusively by women on belt looms” of the Halkha (Lai) people were “among the elaborate products of the Northern Chin Hills”. Lehman went on to say that the Halkha women were “in many respects the most skilled artisans” (Lehman,1963, 1980:165).

Some old people living at Lawngtlai (Mizoram, India) often recall an incident involving Miss Chapman. In 1932, on seeing the dresses of the people at Cheural village, a Lai village in south Mizoram, an impressed Miss Chapman, a Christian missionary working at Serkawn under the London Baptist Mission, was said to have remarked that the Lais definitely qualified to be a nation and not just a simple 'barbaric' tribe.

Apart from a very high degree of technical sophistication and artistic skill involved in making the dresses, the sheer number of different traditional dresses worn on different occasions separately by men and women, speak for themselves. Women alone has 25 different kinds of garments & adornments, excluding 7 others worn by both sexes specifically on a “Bawi Lam” day (feast of banquet). The 25 garments & adornments are: 6 kinds of

blankets or 'puan'; 5 kinds of skirts; 2 shirts or blouses; 4 belts; 3 necklaces; 3 wristlets; 2 hairpins. Men too had 13 different kinds of garments apart from other 7 worn on 'Bawi Lam' day (Hengmanga,1982:119-120).

Rosaline Varsangzuali in her Ph D thesis, *Evolution of Mizo Dress: A Historical Study* (2017), observes: "Notwithstanding the multiplicity and ambiguity in the origin of Lai as an ethnic category, they have achieved cultural advancements especially in dress making. *Some of the finest clothing and dresses in history are the handiwork of artisans and weavers of the oldest and advanced civilizations* (Italics mine). Through their expertise they refined the techniques of their dress making skills and improve their products. This process perhaps can be applied to the Lai production of dresses. The expertise of the Lai women in weaving is rather superior. They developed beautiful cloths with intricate weaving patterns. The use of silk in their dress shows off their skill beautifully" (Varsangzuali, 2017:82).

To sum up, the Lai dresses and the techniques of making them strongly point to the China connection in the past.

Cultural and linguistic similarities

Apart from these, there are many more cultural and linguistic similarities between the Lais of Myanmar, India, etc., and the tribes of south China. For instance, the Li of China use pound rice with wooden pestle and mortar like the Lais and other kindred tribes in India, Myanmar, etc. Just a click on Google would show how similar they look in physical appearances, in traditional housing patterns, food items, etc. B.Lalthangliana also records cultural and linguistic similarities (traditional dress, traditional house, domesticated animals--pigs, chickens, social life, etc.) between the southern tribes of China and tribes of Kuki-Chin-Lushai group of people that include Lai (Lalthangliana, 2001).

'Lairam' and the Middle Kingdom Complex of China

There is still one very significant cultural and civilization feature that points to a connection between the Lais and their origin in China, that is, the Middle Kingdom Complex of China.

The Chinese name for China is Chung Kuo which means 'middle kingdom', or 'central country' (*chung* means *middle, central, centre; kuo* means *kingdom, country*). The Chinese has a concept known as the Middle Kingdom Complex which signifies the Chinese belief that their country is situated at the centre of the universe and that they are the only civilized people in the world surrounded by barbarians (The Columbia Encyclopedia, 6th ed., *Middle Kingdom*, 2020). The famous 9th century A.D. work by Fan Ch'o, a Chinese scholar, for instance, is titled *Man Shu: Book of the Southern Barbarians* (Fan Ch'o, 1961). The book was a report compiled on the southern people of China such as Yunnan Province, Burma, etc.

Latourette, in his classic work *The Chinese: Their History and Culture*, succinctly puts it thus: "The name China is a foreign appellation, probably derived from a dynasty which reigned over the Empire in the third century B.C. The Chinese long held it as an ideal that there should be only one political administration for civilized mankind and regarded their own as that government. Hence no pressing need existed to distinguish their

country from another. They might speak of China as T'ien Hsia 'Under Heaven.' The most frequent name employed was Chung Kuo 'The Middle Kingdom.' The Chinese often denominated themselves Han Jen, or the 'Men of Han,' after a famous dynasty of that name. Tang Jen, or the 'Men of T'ang,' after another famous dynasty, was frequently on the lips of the Chinese in the South. The name officially adopted by the Republic is Chung Hua Min Kuo, literally, 'Central Flowery People's Country,' or, better, 'Central Flowery Republic.' (Latourette, 1938, 1943: 1). In fact, Latourette uses the 'Middle Kingdom' throughout the book instead of using 'China' in reference to China.

The word 'lai' means "middle" or "center" (Lehman 1963, 1980). And the use of the term by the people of the Lais (of Hakha) reflected "their view that they are the cultural and political culmination of the cultural tradition", and that they felt that were superior to all other peoples because of their position at the centre of the universe (Lehman 1963, 1980; Lehman 1967). The Lais call their land 'Lairam'. Literally, *Lairam* means 'central country' and/or 'the Lai country' (*ram* means *country or land*). *Lairam* thus conveys the idea that the Lais are at the centre of the universe and are culturally superior to others surrounding them. The Lais have a strong tendency to look down upon non-Lai people as less cultured and less civilized. The word 'lai' also means, then, superiority, refinement, elegance, productivity, etc.

Lai is an equivalent of 'Sap', a word often used in Mizoram in reference to a white man. Sap as a noun originally refers to an Englishman or any white man. Later on the word is used to refer to a high ranking official other than white man. As an adjective, it connotes trendiness, superiority, elegance, strikingly good look, etc.

It is thus clear that the concept of Lairam (Lai Ram) is akin to the Chinese concept of the Middle Kingdom Complex. Lairam means, literally and conceptually, Middle Kingdom. This may not be a simple coincidence, there could be a strong historical and cultural connection with ancient China, the Middle Kingdom.

'Lairam' as a name for their land must have evolved from the Middle Kingdom (Complex of China), long before the Lais settlement in the Chin Hills, or in Burma itself. They also must have had adopted the word 'lai' for their generic name while in China, long before their settlement at Lailung village in the Chin State, or in Burma itself. Besides, the Lais must have had direct interaction with the Chinese civilization to have derived their generic name from it. In other words, the ancestors of the Lai people must have lived in China for quite a long period of time. And that they must have been a part of the great Chinese civilization. All these are in the realm of possibilities in spite of their not being Chinese, or Han.

Non-Lai tribes having original homeland in China

There are several other non-Lai tribes—Karen, Lisu, Dai, Shan, and Kachin, now found in Myanmar, India, Thailand, etc., whose place of origin is China.

The tribes listed above are culturally quite similar with the Lai people of both modern day China and of India, Myanmar and Bangladesh. All of them are of Mongoloid stock and speak Kra–Dai languages or Sino-Tibetan languages. The areas inhabited by them today are geographically contiguous: South and south west

China; east, north, north east and west Myanmar; north east India; north, north west Thailand; north, north west Laos; north Vietnam.

The Lais, who must have once lived together possibly with these tribes, must have migrated from China into their present homeland in Myanmar, India and Bangladesh just as the other tribes did. Plenty of information about these people are available on Google.

And that the ancient Lai people of the Lai kingdom, the Li people of China, and the Lai (Pawi) people of India, Myanmar, etc., (including with the Ch'iang, the ancestors of the whole Tibeto-Burman language family that we shall later read elsewhere in this book) must be related. Though more researches are no doubt needed to establish a clear link between the three groups, there seems to be close cultural and ethnic affinities between the groups.

Lai historical specifics

Although they are only indicative and suggestive in nature, and would call for further investigations, there are nevertheless certain cultural, civilization and historical features specific only to the Lais (that is, among the Kuki-Lushai-Chin). They are:

- (i) The existence of Lai Kingdom in ancient China.
- (ii) There are descendants of Lai Kingdom known as Lai in China.
- (iii) There are a sub-group of Li nationality in China called Lai.
- (iv) There is a link between the Middle Kingdom Complex of China and 'Lairam'.

Existing literature

Existing literature supports the theory of Lai origin in China as well.

E.R. Leach, a renowned anthropologist, while writing about the Kachins of Burma, observes that,

"The techniques and apparatus of weaving and iron-working and cultivating rice as well as a variety of household equipments ranging from fire-pistons to brass gongs are common; not only to all the hill peoples of Indo-China (Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos, author), Burma and Assam (that is, including today's Mizoram, Manipur, etc., since at the time of publication of Leach's book in 1954, Assam included Mizoram, Manipur, etc., author), but also to similarly situated tribes in western Szechuan (China, author), Formosa, the Philippines, Borneo and much of Indonesia" (Leach 1954,1968: 247).

"It has been argued, Leach continues, "that this distribution of traits reflects a pre-historic migration of 'Indonesian' people. But no plausible chronology could be fitted to such a theory. The only reasonable assumption is that these widely dispersed culture all originally borrowed them from the same source, namely China in the first millennium" (Leach 1954,1968: 247).

In other words, according to this theory advanced by Leach, the KLC people that include the Lais have originated from China. And that the Lais and their allied tribes, or their ancestors, lived in China during 1000 B.C. to A.D.1. This implies that the Lais, or the pre-Lais, and others had left China during the first century A.D. (that is, during A.D. 100).

Commenting specifically under the head 'Origin of the Chins', **Carey & Tuck** (1896, 2008) is convinced, from the available evidences till then, that the Nagas, Chins, Lushais, and Kukis are originally one and the same people. Carey & Tuck says, "Without pretending to speak with authority on the subject, we think we may reasonably accept the theory that the Kukis of Manipur, the Lushais of Bengal and Assam, and the Chins originally lived in what we know as Tibet and are of one and the same stock; *their form of government, method of cultivation, manners and customs, beliefs and traditions all point to one origin*"--italics mine. (Carey & Tuck, 1896, 2008: 2).

It must be borne in mind that ancient Tibet-China territorial boundary was never clearly demarcated. It has also been generally believed that the ancestors of the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family that include the Shan, Chin (Lai), Nagas, Kukis, Lushai (Mizo), etc., once inhabited the Tibet-China region (that is, western and north western China).

Ch'iang people of China as ancestors of Lai

Than Tun and Gordon Luce, the two well known scholars on ancient Myanmar (Burma), say that the Ch'iang people of China were not just the ancestors of the Lai or Chin (Kuki-Lushai-Chin) but of the entire Tibeto-Burman group. The Ch'iang people lived in an area between eastern Tibet and western China on the Tibet-China borders. The Ch'iang people enjoyed a civilization as advanced as the Chinese, but the stronger Chinese (the Han Chinese, author) pushed them to the south (Than Tun 1988: 3). Luce says, "With the expansion of China, the Ch'iang had either the choice to be absorbed or to become nomads in the wilds. It was a hard choice, between liberty and civilization. Your ancestors chose liberty; and they must have gallantly maintained it. But the cost was heavy. It cost them 2000 years of progress. If the Ch'iang of 3000 B.C. were equals of the Chinese civilization, the Burmans of 700 A.D. were not nearly as advanced as the Chinese in 1300 B.C." (Cited in Than Tun, 1988: 4).

Thus, we can say that Than Tun and Luce conclude that the ancestors of the Chins, that include the Lais (or pre-Lais) and all other LKC family, were originally from ancient China.

Two native historians who have spent considerable time in the Chin State of Myanmar, **B. Lalthangliana** and **Lian H. Sakhong** also believe that the Ch'iang were the most likely ancestors of the Kuki-Chin-Lushai group ((Lalthangliana, 2001: 41-46; Sakhong, 2003: 8-9).

We thus conclude by saying that China is the likely place of origin of the Lai people. When, where, and how they lived; and when, why and how did they leave China undoubtedly call for further research and investigations.

Notes

1. Information on the Lai State is obtained from Book of Xia and other related sources. Book of Xia is a part the *Book of Documents* (*Shūjīng*, earlier *Shu-king*) or *Classic of History*, also known as the *Shangshu* ("Esteemed Documents"), is one of the Five Classics of ancient Chinese literature. It is a collection of rhetorical prose attributed to figures of ancient China, and served as the foundation of Chinese political philosophy for over 2,000 years. According to a later tradition, the *Book of Documents* was compiled by the famous Chinese philosopher Confucius (551–479 BC). (Book of Documents, en.wikipedia.org, 2020).

2. Most of them (inhabitants of the Lai Kingdom or state) adopted the surname Lai to commemorate their old state. The largest Lai clans are in China, Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore, Philippines, and Melbourne. Majority of the overseas Lai clans are of the Hakka people followed by the Hokkien/Minnan people. According to the 2010 data, people who are surname Lai ranked 98th most populous in China. The total Lai population is approximately 0.18% or around 2.4 million people out of the China's population of 1.338 billion in 2010. In Taiwan people who are surname Lai is ranked 19th most populous in 2007 (<https://enacademic.com/>, accessed January 18, 2020).

3. Bamboo Dance

The bamboo dance, with slight differences, is found throughout Asia, such as, *Tinikling* from Philippines, *Múa Sạp* from Vietnam, *Lao Kra Top Mai* from Thailand, *Robam Kom Araek* from Cambodia, *Alai Sekap* from Brunei, *Ami Bamboo Dance* from Taiwan, and *Magunatip* from Sabah, East Malaysia.

Available sources indicate that the dance performed in these countries originated from Philippines's *Tinikling*. The name "tinikling" is a reference to birds locally known as tikling, which can be any of a number of rail species, but more specifically refers to the Slaty-breasted Rail (*Gallirallus*), the Buff-banded Rail (*Gallirallus philippensis*), and the Barred Rail (*Gallirallus torquatus*). The term *tinikling* literally means "to perform it 'tikling-like.'" The dance originated in Leyte, an island in the Visayas in the central Philippines. It imitates the movement of the *tikling* birds as they walk between grass stems, run over tree branches, or dodge bamboo traps set by rice farmers. Dancers imitate the *tikling* bird's legendary grace and speed by skilfully manoeuvring between large bamboo poles.

Tinikling is said to have originated in Philippines when she was a colony of Spain (1565--1901). (Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tinikling>, accessed January 23, 2020). The origin of *Tinikling* in Philippines is thus quite recent. But it is more likely that the *Tinikling* originated much earlier, pre-dating the Spanish colonization of Philippines. The bamboo dance of Philippines, in fact, must have been copied from the Lai people of China.

The period of origin of the dance in Philippines (1565--1901) is too recent. The dance has already been performed by the Lai people of Myanmar and India (and certainly by those in China as well) since time immemorial. Separated by thousands of miles of land and water, and in the absence of modern communication networks such as internet, it would be impossible for the Lais in Myanmar and India and the Filipinos to have learned the art of bamboo dance, that is basically similar in style and equipments, from other peoples except through physical and direct cultural contact. Either the Lais of Myanmar, India and China and Filipinos once lived together in China and the latter got to learn the dance from there, or the Filipinos later on learned the dance from the Lais in south China or Hainan.

The cultural origin of the dance among the Lai people of Hainan and those in Myanmar and India, namely, funeral ceremony of the dead, looks far more probable as the true origin of the folk dance than the dodging of bamboo traps by the *tikling* bird as the origin of the dance in Philippines. Therefore, the Filipinos must have learned the dance from the Lai people of China.

While the Lais of Hainan perform the dance on the death of important persons such as a chief or headman of a village, the Lais of Myanmar and India perform the dance specifically on the death of a pregnant woman or a woman who died due to the birth of a child. This slight difference in practice between the Lais of China and Myanmar and India could be because of years of separation of the two groups.

The bamboo dance, known locally by different names, has been performed by peoples of south east Asia, Myanmar, India. Among the Lushai-Kuki-Chin tribes, where the dance is being performed perhaps by all the tribes, it has been established that the dance originated from the Lai people as a crucial part in the funeral ceremony of a woman who died of child birth. Other tribes do perform the dance with no specific reason apart from being an entertainment folk dance.

Further, the widespread prevalence of bamboo dance among the various tribes of south China, south east Asian countries (Malaysia, Cambodia, Philippines, Taiwan, Indonesia, Myanmar, etc), India (Mizoram, Assam, Manipur, etc), etc clearly indicate common descent among these peoples.

In Li dialect, the bamboo dance is known as *Ka Ge*. But the dance is popularly known in Hainan or China as *Dachai Dance* (<https://gbtimes.com/bamboo-pole-dancing>, accessed January 23, 2020).

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