

From the Origin of Tai Musical Instruments 7,000 Years Ago to Musical Traditions in Agricultural Ceremonies of the Tai Peoples

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The Place of Origin of Man and the Birthplace of the Tai

Introduction

This article presents new findings of research on the origin and development of Tai musical instruments used in prehistoric agricultural ceremonies of the Tai peoples. The research was conducted by investigating the native genius of the tradition of using musical instruments in agricultural ceremonies of the Tai in prehistoric times in sources dealing with Chinese archaeology, Chinese historical records, and the history of Chinese art and culture, sources dealing with the birthplace of the Tai in China, and sources dealing with musical instruments used in agricultural ceremonies of the Tai.

The Tai are one of the most ancient of peoples. They derive from Eastern Man, the oldest form of man, 2,500,000-year-old remains of whom have been found at Yuan Mo in Yunnan Province, and of 1,700,000-year-old Yuan Mo Man have descended through Paleolithic times, 600,000 to 30,000 years ago, and Neolithic times, 7,000 to 4,000 years ago, down to the present, when Tai peoples still live in Yunnan Province. The author's paper "The Wisdom of Tai Agricultural Culture in Prehistoric Times" presented evidence that the area inhabited by the Tai in prehistory was the first place on earth in which agriculture was practiced—not the Fertile Crescent in the Middle East as has heretofore been thought.

The first King of the Tai in legendary times was the Yellow Emperor, or Emperor Huang Ti, who reigned some 4,500 years ago. He was the father of King Hao, who was the progenitor of the Tai and who ruled in the area of present-day Henan.

The founder of the Hsia Dynasty, about 4,200 years ago, was Emperor Yu, who was probably Tai, for the name of the dynasty is the Tai word *hua*, meaning "head," which was pronounced by the Chinese as "hia" or "hsia." There is evidence at this time tripods (*ting*) were already being cast in bronze.

The following period, the Zhao Dynasty, about 3,000 years ago, saw the beginning of feudal society and also the beginning of iron forging technology, by means of which implements such as hoes and axes for use in agriculture were made. Oxen and buffaloes were used in plowing, and irrigation was first practiced. Worship was given the most powerful god of nature, the god Thian, or Thaen, the God of Heaven, and the emperor was held to be the Son of Heaven.

Later, during the Han Dynasty, the people of China were influenced by the culture of the Han, who were a Turkic people, from whom they adopted many elements of culture such as musical instruments and the use of chopsticks, and thus it was at this period that the culture of the Chinese clearly diverged from that of the Tai.

Tai Musical Instruments in Agricultural Culture

The oldest evidence of Tai musical instruments is approximately 7,000 years old and is found in the Museum of the Hemudu Site in the Yuyao District of Zhejiang Province near the mouth of the Yangtze Kiang River. This is a large number of bone flutes in very good condition. I speculate that these were used in ceremonies related to agriculture, for the area around the mouth of the Yangtze Kiang is the birthplace of Tai agriculture, where 7,000-year-old fossil grains of non-glutinous rice have been recovered. Most archaeologists and agricultural scientists agree that the Tai were the first to cultivate non-glutinous rice in what is now China.

The Yellow Emperor, or Emperor Ueng Ti, who was the progenitor of the Tai and who ruled in the area of present-day Henan to the south of the Yellow River some 4,500 years ago, had a bamboo stem fashioned into a musical instrument with twelve tones.

Bronze drums of the Tai dating from the Shang Dynasty approximately 3,700 years ago have been discovered in Henan Province.

During the Zhao Dynasty, which ruled in the area now Shanxi Province some 3,000 years ago, the emperor, who was of Tai descent, based his government on musical and ethical education, and there were official positions for musicians in the government. As a result, music flourished. There was music for the worship of deities related to agriculture, such as the gods of the earth, the seasons, mountains, and watercourses. The instruments used during the Zhao Dynasty were products of Tai native genius: the single bamboo tube, the flute, and the raft of bamboo tubes, the *khaen* (something like pan pipes). A bronze axe from this period bears figures wearing feather headdresses, one playing a *khaen* and the other cymbals.

Bronze drums of the Thian, or Thaen, culture in Yunnan dating from about 2,500 years ago, of the type called *seu jai shan*, bear figures of dancers wearing feather headdresses. Such dancing is likely related to the *fon nok yung* dance of the Tai Lue or the *king krara* dance of the Shan. Bronze drums of this type found in Vietnam, called Dong Son drums, bear figures of *khaen* players and dancers. Tai peoples beat bronze drums as part of rainmaking ceremonies, a practice continued

to this day by Tai peoples in Guizhao Province such as the Tang, the Sui, and the Pu Yi.

During the Han Dynasty, ethnic Chinese ruled the lands to the north of the Yangtze while the lands to the south were inhabited by Tai. In the grave of a Tai noblewoman in Ma Wang Tui in Changsha, Hunan Province, evidence has been found of early Tai musical instruments of 2,100 years ago, including flutes, *khaen*, Chinese dulcimers, and a set of figures representing an ensemble of musicians performing probably used in funerary rites.

Tai musical instruments became definitely separated from those of the Chinese during the Han Dynasty. During the Jin Dynasty (ca. 250-600), under the influence of Han musical instruments, traditional Chinese instruments disappeared from China but the tradition continued in Japanese instruments, including stringed instruments, drums, and cymbals, which show their Turkish origins.

After the Han Dynasty, the Chinese dulcimer became very popular and a distinctive element of Chinese culture, witness drawings of musicians playing dulcimers from the Song Dynasty and drawings showing musicians playing dulcimers and mandolins from the Thang Dynasty.

Other artifacts from the Thang Dynasty are porcelain figures with an indigo glaze of musicians playing flutes, drums, *khaen*, and cymbals, and there is also evidence of the lyre from the same period.

The Musical Instruments of the Oldest Cultures

The oldest musical instruments known, a bone flute and a drum, originated in Paleolithic times (33,000-10,000 B.C.). From the civilization of Mesopotamia (4,000-333 B.C.), a 2,600-year old Sumerian harp has been found. From ancient Egyptian civilization (3,000-30 B.C.), there is a harp and a flute between 3,500 and 4,000 years old and a lyre and a wind instrument with a reed between 300 and 3,500 years old. In Indian civilization during the Pre-Vedic Period (5,000-3,500 years ago), the Dravidians were familiar with small cymbals made of bronze and with dancing, as shown by stone and bronze figures of girls dancing.

Origin of the Worship of Agricultural Deities by the Tai

Man of 500,000 years ago, that is, Peking Man, the progenitor of human beings in the north of China as well as the Tai, used stone implements and flint. Later came the time of Three Emperors, who were probably Tai. One of these, Emperor Sui Yin (or flint user) knew how to start fires for cooking with flint and friction on wood. Another, Emperor Hak Hi (or raiser of animals for the household) was able to catch fish with nets and knew the Eight Symbols (*poi kuai*), which are all from nature: sky, earth, water, mountain, thunder, wind, and swamp. The third, Emperor Sin Long (or god of agriculture) made spades and hoes with which to cultivate the land and engaged in barter and trade.

Later, people worshipped natural phenomena, such as the sun, the moon, the stars, mountains, rivers, the sea, heaven, thunder, and earthquakes. In the time

of the Ngiau kings, the gods of the seasons were worshipped as were water, fire, lightning, and lakes.

The most important artifacts related to Tai agricultural deities from Hemudu Site in the Yuyao District of Zhejiang of Zhejiang Province are ivory vessels and swords on which are carved images of birds flying toward the sun, which is a most ancient symbol of time of the Tai. This indicates that the Tai worshipped the sun and birds no less than 7,000 years ago. From a later time are pictures of birds gathering the sun from the Jin Sa archaeological site in Choeng Tu, Szechuan Province in western China dated to 3,500 years ago. Birds surrounding the sun is a design often found on bronze drums, indicating that this symbol is a product of Tai genius, for, as proposed by Professor Jiang Ueng Liang, these drums are also a product of Tai genius.

During the Shang Dynasty (about 3,700 years ago), worship of a variety of gods and spirits was widespread, and special importance was attached to agriculture. During the Zhao Dynasty (about 3,000 years ago), when music was especially emphasized, it was held to be very important in governing the county to worship various deities, including the earth, mountains, watercourses, forests, swamps, and ponds. By law, only the emperor could worship large mountains or rivers anywhere in the realm. When there was a natural disaster or an eclipse, special rites were performed.

In the time of the Emperor Si Ong (about 2,200 years ago), rites were performed to honor the Guardians of the Four Directions and certain mountains in various regions.

During the Han Dynasty (about 2,000 years ago), music was promoted and worship was given to five deities: the White God, the Green God, the Yellow God, the Red God, and the Black God. At the same time, rites honoring Heaven and the earth were continued as in the past.

At present, the Tai peoples continue to worship agricultural deities, such as feasts in honor of the gods of mountains held by the Tai Koe Lao and the Tai Pu Yi and rites to ask the gods of heaven and earth for rain among the Tai Sui and the Tai Pu Yi.

The Origins of the Worship of the Dragon to Request Rain

The Yellow Emperor (about 4,700 years ago) was an ancestor of the Tai, for he was the father of King Hao, the progenitor of the Tai. King Hao was an agricultural deity and ruled in what is now Honan Province south of the Huang Ho. He unified the Tai people into one nation and created the dragon as its symbol by bringing together in the dragon the totems of the various tribes; thus, the head was taken from the Cow Tribe, the body from the Snake Tribe, the scales and tail from the Fish Tribe, the antlers from the Deer Tribe, and the feet from the Bird Tribe. The name given the dragon by King Hao was *luang*, meaning "great." The dragon was the king of the animals and was more powerful than any of them. Thus, it was that later, the just

king was regarded as “a golden dragon born among us,” and the word *luang* came to be associated with the king, so *wang luang* means the palace *wang* of the king *luang*, or royal palace.

Subsequently, the Chinese, migrating from China Turkistan and taking over both banks of the Huang Ho, received the dragon from the Tai. The Chinese pronunciation of the name was *long* or *leng*. The form was associated with royalty was *leng*, and this was placed in front of a noun. When Buddhism was introduced into China, the word *leng* was used to translate the Pali word *naga*. Tai peoples refer to the dragon as *tua luang* as seen in literary works such as *Thao Hung Thao Jiang* and the version of *Sang Sin Xai* in northeastern Thailand. The Tai word for dragon, *luang*, has passed into use in other languages in addition to Chinese, including Hmong, Yao, Vietnamese, and Khmer. In Khmer, the word for dragon is *ma-rong*.

The Tai regard the dragon as a symbol for water. The word *rung* in expression *rung kin nam*, meaning “rainbow,” refers to the dragon; thus, the meaning of the expression is “the dragon is giving water.” This belief led to rites to ask the dragon for rain at held at the beginning of the planting season by Tai peoples, and such rites are still celebrated by Tai peoples in China like the Tang, the Sui, and the Pu Yi.

In times of drought, a dragon is constructed. The body is a bamboo frame covered with yellow paper, and the head is fashioned with cloth, and these fit over the heads of dancers. The dragon is followed by a parade of people carrying flags on which are written prayers asking for rain and of musicians blowing flutes, beating drums, and striking gongs and cymbals in order to get the attention of the Lord of Heaven.

At present, Tai peoples in China still hold rites worshipping the dragon to ask for rain. For example, the Pu Yi in Guizhou hold a dragon dance ceremony in the planting season to request fertility and abundance, After being invited into the village, the dragon is worshipped and musicians take part in the parade blowing flutes, beating drums, striking cymbals, and sounding bronze drums.

Conclusion

This research has yielded new knowledge indicating that Tai musical instruments originated no less than 7,000 years ago. The evidence is bone flutes discovered at **the Hemudu Site in the Yuyao District of Zhejiang Province**. A 12-tone bamboo flute has been found which dates from the time of the Yellow Emperor, who is the progenitor of the Tai. From the Shang Dynasty is the oldest known bronze drum, which is approximately 3,600 years old. Dating from the following dynasty, the Zhao, about 3,500 years ago, is a bronze axe, likely the product of Tai genius, on which are figures playing the *khaen* and cymbals. Likewise, bronze drums both of the Dong Son and Tian types,

another product of Tai genius, carry figures adorned with feathered headdresses of dancers and *khaen* players. Dating from the Han Dynasty are 1,200-year-old flutes, *khaens*, and dulcimers from the tomb of a Tai noblewoman in Honan Province. It was at this time that Tai musical instruments became distinct from Chinese instruments, for the Chinese instruments were those of the Han, a Turkic people with their own instruments. There is evidence of musical instruments being used in agricultural ceremonies of the Tai extending from no less than 5,000 years ago down to the present. There are many examples. In the *mueang* ceremony of the Tai Lue, the *salo* fiddle, the *koi* flute, and the *mong choeng* drum are played. In the Shan household spirit ceremony, gongs, drums, and cymbals are played. The *phi mot phi meng* dance ceremony of the Tai Yuan is accompanied by a *pi phat* orchestra. In the rites of the Tai Dam to honor their ancestors, a shaman plays a flute. The *bang* fiddle is played for the *fon phu Thai* dance. In the dragon ceremonies of various Tai peoples to beg for rain, gongs, flutes, drums, and cymbals are played and bronze drums are sounded. Musical instruments figure in the skyrocket festivals of Tai peoples to beg the Lord of Heaven for rain. For example the Phu Tai play *klong king* drums. Also in the skyrocket contest, the *sa-nai* flute is played. The Tai Lue strike gongs and beat *mong choeng* drums before igniting skyrockets and parading fireworks (*bang salot*).

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