

The Center for Southeast Asian Studies
Brown Bag Series
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AGIS-Assisted Study of the Origins and Spread of Tai Irrigated Rice Engineering and Culture in Southern China from a Comparative-Historical Linguistics Perspective

A lecture by
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*Friday, October 5th
12:00-1:30 p.m.
Webster Hall 203
University of Hawaii at Manoa*



The early Tai were among the first people to develop a system of irrigated rice production employing an array of skillfully engineered ditches (*meuang*) and dikes (*fai*) to channel water from the streams and rivers of the intermountain valleys of southern China that they inhabited. The development of this technology and culture, organized around manpower for construction and maintenance of the system, can be reconstructed using comparative-historical linguistics and further analyzed and illustrated using GIS. Some scholars place the historical origins of Tai irrigated rice culture as somewhere in Yunnan Province in southwestern China.

The data presented in this study, while not exhaustive, points roughly to origins in the regions of Guangxi that border northern Vietnam at the time of proto-Tai some 2,000 years ago. One can easily explain the expansion of the Tai in terms of their ability as food producers coupled with their skill in organizing manpower derived from the need to build and maintain irrigation systems. The early Tai found themselves in an environment that readily leant itself to reliable *meuang-fai* technology in contrast to the *baray* system of the Khmer, which was much more subject to the vagaries of nature and based on a different social system.

Dr. John Hartmann is a Professor of Thai Languages and Literatures at Northern Illinois University (NIU) and was named a Distinguished Teaching Professor in 2006. Dr. Hartmann was the Acting Director of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, NIU, in 1987 and 1990. He was also the Language Director of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, NIU, from 1986 to 1987. Dr. Hartmann received his M.A. and Ph.D. in Linguistics from the University of Michigan.

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