

## Reinterpreting Inscription I

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### บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้เสนอการตีความคำว่า “ลายสือ” ในศิลาจารึก หลักที่ ๑ ใหม่ จากเดิมที่ตีความกันไว้ว่า พ่อขุนรามคำแหงทรงประดิษฐ์อักษรไทยขึ้น โดยตีความคำว่า “ลายสือ” เป็น “ตัวอักษร” และคำว่า “ใส่” เป็น “ประดิษฐ์” การตีความดั้งเดิมดังกล่าวนี้ไม่สอดคล้องกับความหมายของคำว่า “ลาย” และ “สือ” ในภาษาไทยถิ่นอื่นๆ บทความนี้เสนอการตีความคำว่า “ลายสือ” ให้สอดคล้องกับความหมายที่ใช้อยู่ในภาษาไทยถิ่นอื่นๆ ที่ยังใช้คำเหล่านี้อยู่ คือ หมายถึง “หนังสือ” หรือ “ลายลักษณ์” ความหมายนี้ทำให้เราต้องตีความข้อความในศิลาจารึกหลักที่ ๑ ใหม่เป็น “แต่ก่อนลายลักษณ์ (จารึก) เป็นภาษาไหนที่ไม่มี พ่อขุนรามคำแหงโปรดให้ใส่ลายลักษณ์เป็นภาษาไทย จึงมีลายลักษณ์ (หรือ หนังสือเป็น) ภาษาไหน”

### Abstract

This paper proposes a new interpretation of a passage in the Ram Khamhaeng Inscription. The common interpretation of this passage is that King Ram Khamhaeng of the first Thai Kingdom invented the Thai alphabet. Two words crucial to this interpretation of the passage are ลายสือ /laay-sǎi/, interpreted as “alphabet”, and ใส่ /sài/, interpreted as “to invent”. The aforesaid meanings, however, are not in line with the meanings of the corresponding words in Thai and in other Tai languages. In this paper, “writings” and “book” are proposed as the meanings of ลายสือ /laay-sǎi/ and “to put; to put on; to put in” of ใส่ /sài/. These meanings are in line with the meanings of the corresponding words in Thai and in other Tai languages. With the new meanings of the two words, the passage should be read as “King Ram Khamhaeng had the inscription written in Thai”; hence, the first Thai inscription.

## Introduction

This paper has only one simple purpose. It is to ascertain the meaning of the crucial expression - ลายสีอิ */laay-sǐi/* in the First Inscription.

## The Ram Khamhaeng Inscription

The Ram Khamhaeng Inscription is the first Thai inscription, purportedly created by King Ram Khamhaeng, the third king of the first Thai kingdom, Sukhothai. Inscription I is probably the most studied inscription in Thailand. It has long been a subject of debate as to whether the inscription was created in 1283 A.D., during the Sukhothai period, or whether it was created under King Rama the Fourth of the Bangkok period. (For more detail see Chamberlain 1991). Using comparative method, Anthony Diller, 1991, demonstrated convincingly that the Thai language used in the Ram Khamhaeng inscription was before the convergence of the consonant sounds ข.ไซ้ */khǎw-khài/* and ข.ชวด */khǎw-khùat/*. By the time of the Bangkok period, the ข.ชวด */khǎw-khùat/* sound had completely merged with the ข.ไซ้ */khǎw-khài/* sound so it was impossible for Bangkok Thai speakers to separate the two consonants in writing accurately as they appeared in Inscription I. Then as now, Bangkok Thai speakers did not have the ข.ชวด */khǎw-khùat/* sound in their sound system. This paper does not discuss the period of the language used in Inscription I directly but, in a way, it solidifies the view that the inscribing language belonged to the period before the consonant mergers discussed by Diller in 1991.

## The Crucial Paragraph in Inscription I

Inscription I was inscribed on all four sides of the stone. The paragraph which purportedly states that King Ram Khamhaeng invented the Thai alphabet is on the fourth side, from line 8 to line 11. The common interpretation of these four lines is that formerly there was no Thai alphabet and King Ram Khamhaeng invented it. The following are the inscribed statements with the common interpretation:

เมื่อ ก่อน ลายสือ ไท นี้ บ  
 mîa-kòon laay-sǎ̌ǎ̌ thay níi bɔɔ  
 formerly alphabet Thai this not

“Formerly, there was no Thai alphabet.”

มี 1205 ศก ปีมะแม พ่ขุนรามคำแหง หา ใครใจ  
 mii 1205 sòk pii-ma-mɛɛ phɔ̀w-khǔn raam-kham-hǎ̌ɛŋ hǎa khây-cay  
 have 1205 the year of the goat King Ram Khamhaeng but wish

“In the year of the goat, 1205, King Ram Khamhaeng but wished

ในใจ แล ใส่ ลายสือ ไท นี้ ลายสือ ไท นี้ จึง มี เพี  
 -nay-cay læ sà̌y laay-sǎ̌ǎ̌ thay níi laay-sǎ̌ǎ̌ thay níi čɛŋ mii ph  
 in heart and invent alphabet Thai this alphabet Thai this therefore have

to invent Thai alphabet. This Thai alphabet thus came into being.”

อ พ่ขุน ผู้ นั้น ใส่ ไว้.....  
 (ph)îa phɔ̀w-khǔn phûu nan sà̌y wáy  
 because the king person that invent put

“Because that king invented it.”

The interpreted meanings of ลายสือ /laay-sǎ̌ǎ̌/ and and ใส่ /sà̌y/ above are quite different from the current meanings. They do not agree with the meanings of their corresponding words in other Tai languages. ลายสือ /laay-sǎ̌ǎ̌/ is a compound noun in Thai. This compound is found only in Inscription I. In Siamese, or Thai, , /laay-lák- ʔàk-sǔw/ or /nǎŋ- sǎ̌ǎ̌/ is used instead. Both ลาย “laay” and สือ “sǎ̌ǎ̌”, however, are cognate. They are found in all languages of the Tai family, as shown in Fang Kuei Li ‘s A Handbook of Comparative Tai (1975; p. 125).

	Tone	Siamese	Lungchow	Po-ai
1 striped	A2	lai	laai	laai
2. writing	(naŋ A1)	sīī	īīī	īīī

William J Gedney's Comparative Word List also shows the wide distribution of the word *สื้อ* /*sii,Al*/ with the meanings "book" or "writing" in all the three branches of the Tai language family.

Southwestern		Central		Northern	
Black Tai	su <sup>1</sup>	Western Nung	su <sup>1</sup>	Le Ping	ໄຮ໌ <sup>3</sup>
White Tai	su <sup>1</sup>	Lung Chou	ໄຮ໌	Lung Ming	ໄຮ໌ <sup>1</sup>
Muang Yong Lao	su <sup>1</sup>			Yay	θu <sup>1</sup>
				Saek	su <sup>2</sup>

### Words referring to "writing" and "character letters" in Tai Languages

"Alphabet" and "to invent" as the interpreted meanings of *ลายสื้อ* /*laay-sǎi*/ and *ใส่* /*sài*/ are aberrant. They do not agree with the meanings of their corresponding words in other Tai languages. *ลายสื้อ* /*laay-sǎi*/ is a compound noun in Thai. This compound is found only in Inscription I. In current Thai, *หนังสือ* /*nǎŋ-sǎi*/ would be used instead of *ลายสื้อ* /*laay-sǎi*/. Both *ลาย* "laay" and *สื้อ* "sǎi", however, are cognate. They are found in all the three branches of the Tai family, as shown in Fang Kuei Li 's A Handbook of Comparative Tai (1975; p. 125).

	Tone	Siamese	Lungchow	Po-ai
1. striped	A2	lai	laai	laai
2. writing	(naŋ A1)	sii	ᨡii	ᨡii

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Muang Yong Lao	su <sup>1</sup>	Yay	θu <sup>1</sup>		
		Saek	su <sup>2</sup>		

Dehong, a Southwestern Tai, however, does not use /su, A1/ to mean “book”. It uses /laai, A3/ and, /lik, D3/ instead, from A Dictionary of Dehong, Southwest China. (Luo Yongxian, 1999), for example.

/laai <sup>2</sup> /	striped, spotty; writings, letter, document.
/laai <sup>1</sup> /	to read
/lik <sup>5</sup> laai <sup>2</sup> /	books; newspapers; writings
/lik <sup>5</sup> /	book; writings; volume
/to <sup>6</sup> laay <sup>2</sup> /	written words; written characters
/to <sup>6</sup> lik <sup>5</sup> /	orthography

It is noteworthy that /to<sup>6</sup>/, a classifier, is specifically needed to refer to character letters in Dehong. The same is true in Tai Nue. In her narration about her trip to visit the Tai Nue people, Banjob Bhandumetha, 1984, explained that the Tai alphabet in Sip Song Panna, Yunnan, is called either โตไต /to<sup>A2</sup> tay<sup>A3</sup>/ or / to<sup>A2</sup> lik<sup>D3</sup> tay<sup>A3</sup>/ and that “writings” or “book” is called “/lik<sup>D3</sup>/ or /laay<sup>A3</sup>/. In this language, to study is to learn writings or to learn books; hence, to study is to /heen<sup>A3</sup> lik<sup>D3</sup> heen<sup>A3</sup> laay<sup>A3</sup>/, /heen<sup>A3</sup>/ is to learn. In a nearby Shan city called Muang Khon, a teacher, an instructor or a learned person is called /mɔɔ<sup>A1</sup> laay<sup>A3</sup>/.

In Ahom Buranji or Ahom chronicles of the Tai in Assam, India, (Barua, 1985), /laay<sup>A3</sup>/ and /cia/ are used to refer to “writings”. The word /cia/ is compounded to /laay<sup>A3</sup>/ to mean “writings”, for example,

/tɛm cia maay laay / “to write words or notes on paper”  
to write to write

/phaa cia phaa laay maa duay/ “phaa” means “to bring along something”  
To bring along the “writings” or the “letter”

White Tai of Vietnam, from the Tai–Vietnamese–English Dictionary by Dieu Chinh Nhim and Jean Donaldson, 1970, has three different words for “writings” – *su*, *san*, and *lic*. Again, to refer to alphabet letters, the classifier /to<sup>A2</sup>/ is added to *san*.

Tai	Vietnamese	
<i>sur</i>	<i>chữ</i> :	letter
<i>san</i>	<i>chữ, thơ</i> :	letter
<i>đu san</i>	<i>xem thơ</i> :	to read a letter
<i>tem san</i>	<i>viết thơ</i> :	to write a letter
<i>lic (pǎp)</i>	<i>lich</i> :	calendar
<i>tô san</i>	<i>chữ</i>	character letters

Nung of North Vietnam also uses /*shǐ*/ for writing.

<i>pi</i>	<i>nang</i>	<i>mu hn</i>	<i>té</i>	<i>slón</i>	<i>shǐ</i>
Older	sister	he, his	she	teach	writings

(from Nung Grammar by Janice E. Saul and Nancy Freibeger Wilson, 1980)

From the examples above, we may conclude that both /*laay*<sup>A3</sup>/ and /*sǐǐ*<sup>A1</sup>/ are used widely in all three branches of the Tai language. However, /*laay*<sup>A3</sup>/ has two meanings – “striped” and “writings”. The first meaning is spread more widely than the latter. This may mean that the first meaning, striped, is older. Also /*sǐǐ*<sup>A1</sup>/, meaning “writings” is older than /*laay*<sup>A3</sup>/ with the same meaning. /*sǐǐ*<sup>A1</sup>/ happens to be a loanword from Chinese with same meaning. This could also mean that /*laay*<sup>A3</sup>/ developed the second meaning, writings, after /*sǐǐ*<sup>A1</sup>/ . We may also conclude from the examples that in Tai languages the classifier *ตัว* /*tua*/ is compounded to the word *ลาย* /*laay*<sup>A3</sup>/ or *สือ* /*sǐǐ*<sup>A1</sup>/ or *สาร* /*saan*<sup>A1</sup>/ or *เลข* /*lik*/ for the compound word to mean character letter. That is *ลายสือ* /*laay sǐǐ*/ in the Ram Khamhaeng Inscription must be interpreted as “writings” not “alphabet”. The classifier /*tua*/ must be compounded to /*laay sǐǐ*/ for the word to mean “alphabet”. Hence,

เมื่อ	ก่อน	ลายสือ	ไท	นี้	บ่	มี
mǐa-kòon	laay-sǐǐ	thay	nǐi	bòò	mii	

should be interpreted as “ Formerly, this Thai writing or Thai inscription did not exist.”  
Or “ Formerly, there was no Thai inscription.”

พ่อขุนรามคำแหง	หา	ใคร่	ใจ
phôo-khūn raam-kham-hǎəŋ	hǎa	khŕây	cay
King Ram Khamhaeng	but	wished	

ในใจ	แะ	ใส่	ลายสือ	ไท	นี้	ลายสือ	ไท	นี้	จึง	มี	เพ็
-nay-cay	leɛ	sày	laay-sǎi	thay	nii	laay-sǎi	thay	nii	cəŋ	mii	ph
in heart	and	put	writing	Thai	this	writing	Thai	this	therefore	have	

to put this Thai writing. This Thai writing thus came into being.

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