The world turned upside down: sago-palm processors in Northeast India and the origins of Chinese civilisation

XIV EURASEAA, Dublin
18-21st September 2012

The sub-Himalayan Corridor: Just what is going on in North East India?

Roger Blench

Kay Williamson Educational Foundation

Assumptions about proto-Sino-Tibetan I

- The usual image of the Sino-Tibetan language phylum is of a coherent grouping of agricultural peoples in the region between the Himalayas and Yunnan giving rise to the Sinitic languages and in due course to Chinese civilisation.
- It now appears that this view may be *completely wrong*.
- Arunachal Pradesh is largely occupied by highly diverse populations speaking either Sino-Tibetan languages or possibly isolates.
- Some of these peoples are former hunter-gatherers, and until recently depended for subsistence on tubers, vegetative crops and processing the sago palm.
- The archaeology of NE India is poorly developed, and in particular there are no direct dates to establish the date or process of the transition from foraging to agriculture.

Sino-Tibetan

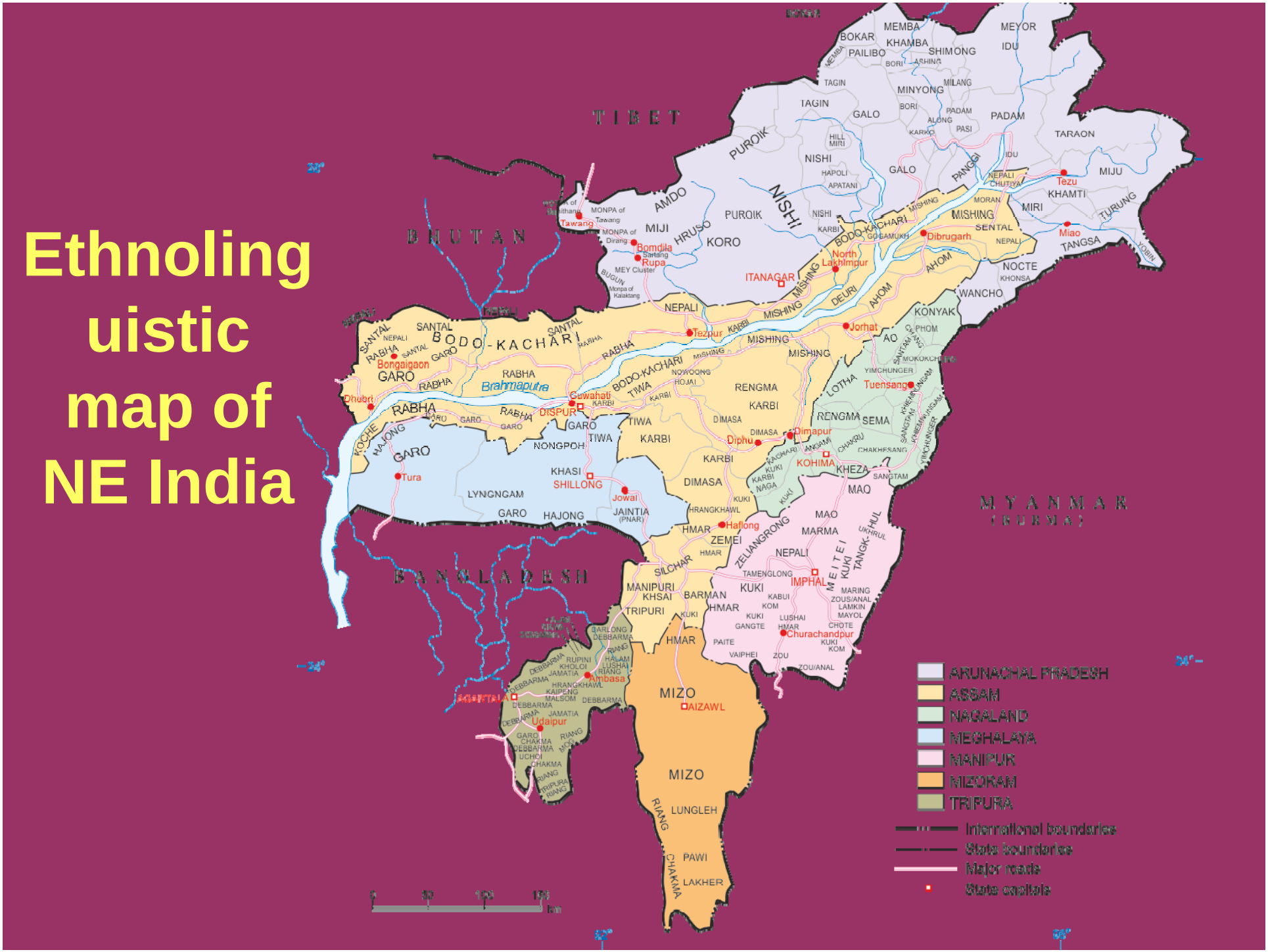
Changing direction

- Ethnographic evidence suggests this might be quite late in some regions, with hunting and gathering remaining an important element in subsistence until recently.
- Linguistic methods can be used to contribute to hypotheses concerning the nature of this process.
- The paper explores regional linguistic ethnohistory, contributing a new and more accurate map of languages. It then looks at evidence for subsistence, in particular the significance of the mithun and vegetative crops such as taro and the Musaceae.

A new approach

- Is the reconstruction of prehistory of NE India using comparative and historical linguistics.
- This involves the compilation of lists of vernacular names for crops and animals or other subsistence items for as many languages as data is available, and using similarities between lexical items to track borrowings and reconstructions.
- By this technique we can detect relative antiquity (mithuns are old, goats recent) but also the geographic sources of adopted species (rice spreads up from the Brahmaputra valley, taro diffuses into the region from further east).
- These results do not give absolute dates, as these depend on a correlation with directly-dated materials derived from archaeology. But they do allow us to model the patterning of the transition from foraging and thus provide a background to target excavation.

Ethnolinguistic map of NE India



A new approach II

- From the Palaeolithic onwards the region must have been inhabited by highly diverse hunter-gatherers. These would undoubtedly have spoken comparably diverse languages, which have largely disappeared today, although evidence for them may survive as substrates in existing languages.
- Only in Arunachal Pradesh, where many languages are difficult to classify, such as Puroik, Mey, Bugun, Koro, Hruso and Miji, are there probable survivals from this period.
- Elsewhere, such as in the Khasi Hills and the Assam plains, the subsequent expansion of incoming populations has eliminated the traces of the languages of foragers.
- In addition, in Arunachal Pradesh we find evidence that even populations who farm today, such as the Puroik and Milang, remained partly dependent on semi-wild plants, such as the sago palm and the tree-fern, until recent times.

Sago processors

- Ethnographic accounts of populations such as the Puroik (Sulung) suggest that they *are* still largely hunters and sago-exploiters and the Milang were until 1 or 2 generations ago .

Milang washing sago log

Mithuns

- The mithun (*Bos frontalis*) is the characteristic bovid in NE India, the most prized cultural species. Linguistically it is the only species which is embedded, with the same lexeme across many languages. Words for all other livestock species are derived from it.

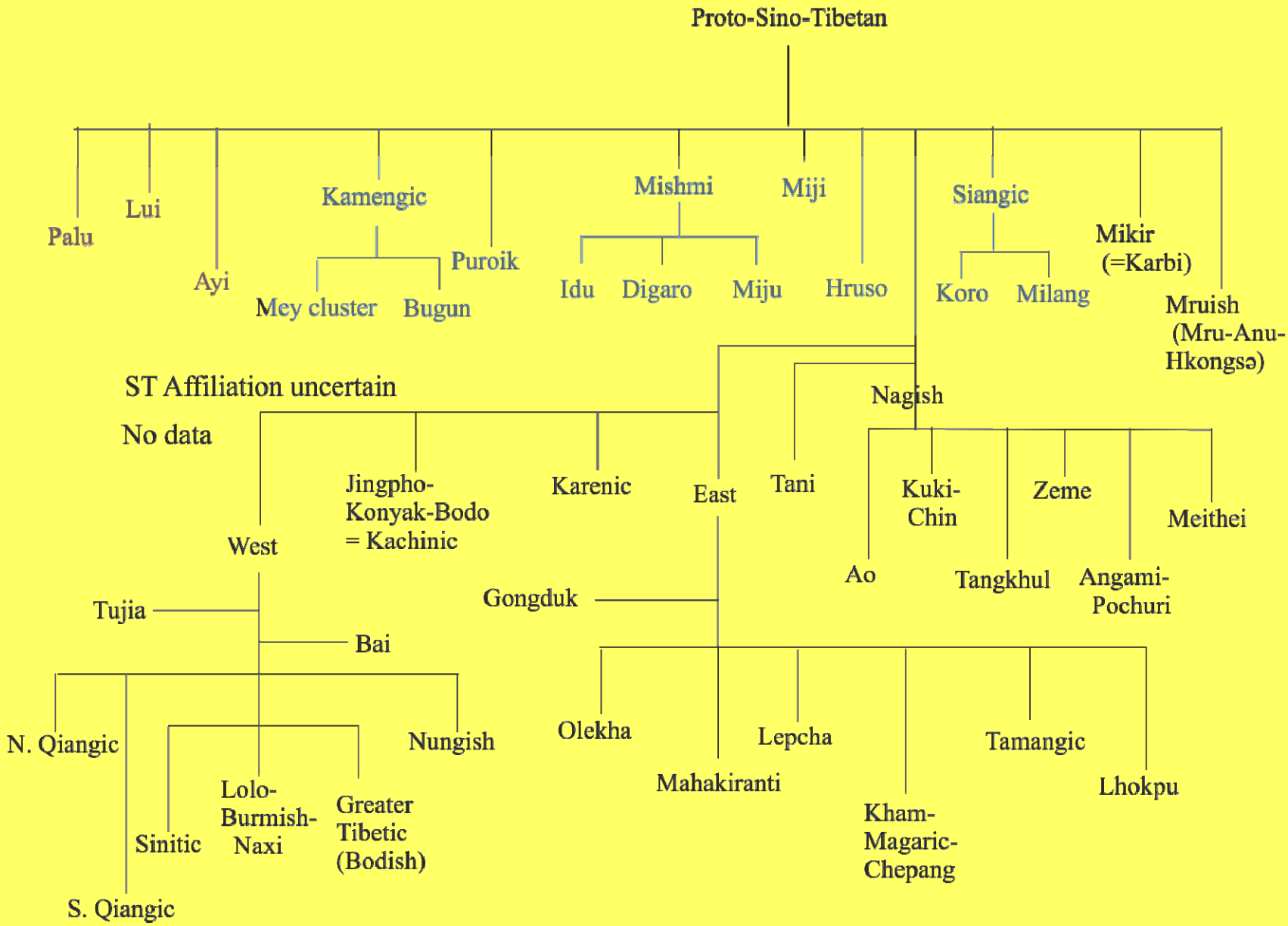
Vegetative crops, plantains and taro

- Plantains are both widely grown and semi-wild types exploited throughout the region, along with yams and taro

Thinking about the Sino-Tibetan tree

- Published views on the internal structure of Sino-Tibetan and its supposed homeland do not fit with the linguistic data on subsistence or environment
- The publication of ‘starred forms’ without the datasets that supposedly inform them is simply not to be trusted
- No researcher can claim to have a properly worked out ‘tree’ because the data on many little-known languages is NE India is too exiguous and poorly transcribed. Until we have better data speculation is king.
- But we can say is that there are numerous ‘small’ languages which appear to be very different from one another.
- Moreover, their subsistence vocabulary as regards crops and livestock appears to be largely borrowed from major regional languages

Rethinking the Sino-Tibetan 'tree'



Sino-Tibetan expansion: a new model I

- The earliest speakers of Sino-Tibetan were highly diverse foragers living in an arc between the eastern slopes of the Himalayas and regional lowland jungles up to 9,000 years ago and practising arboriculture (sago)
- Some spoke early Sino-Tibetan languages, others unknown languages now present only as substrates and perhaps surviving as Kusunda

- Seasonal foragers exploit the high Tibetan Plateau from 7500 BP
- Perhaps 6-5000 BP ‘livestock revolution’ takes place in the mid-level Himalayas. Yak herders move up and settle the Tibetan Plateau permanently.

Sino-Tibetan expansion: a new model II

- Gathering of wild cereals (buckwheat etc.) and tubers (high-altitude taro) leads to proto-agriculture in the mid-level Himalayas
- Foragers who will become the Naga complex began to practise vegeculture (taro, plantains) (NE India) and animal management (mithun) by 6000 BP possibly, through contact with Austroasiatic speakers
- By 5000 BP diverse early Sino-Tibetan groups in the Himalayas begin spreading eastwards to China. Sinitic is *not* a primary branch, but simply the language of one of many migratory groups
- Proto-Tujia, proto-Bai and probably others meet unknown populations (Hmong-Mienic? Austronesians?) with domestic pigs, millet, while also cultivating and beginning to domesticate rice

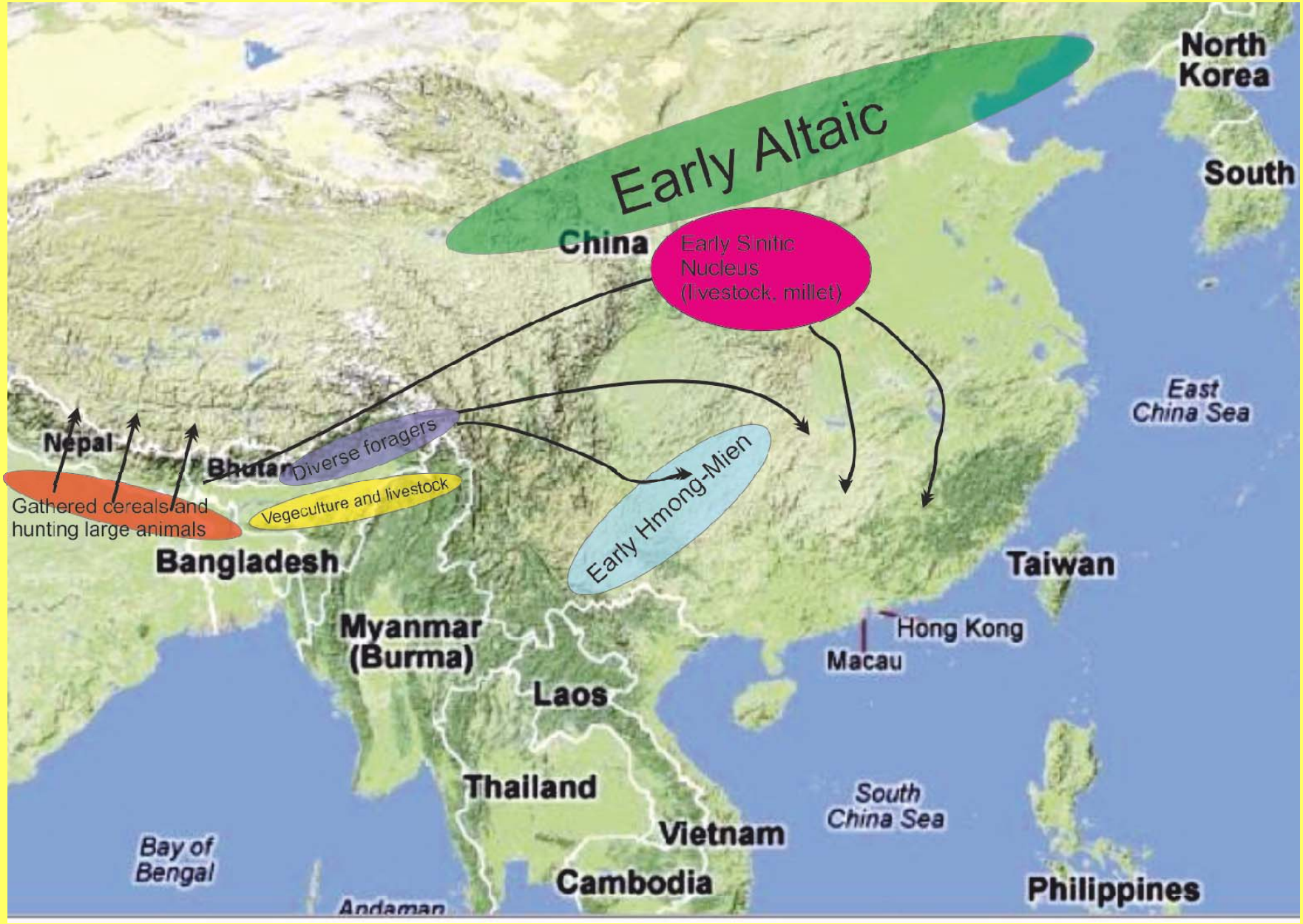
Sino-Tibetan expansion: a new model III

- The Sinitic languages expand southwards, assimilating or encapsulating many small groups. They encounter Hmong-Mien speakers with rice and switch millet terminology to rice
- Rice moves up from India but also westwards from China (hence hybridised types) and overlays older cereals where ecologically possible
- Ruminants (cows, sheep, goats) spread downwards into China from Central Asia 4400 BP (? Altaic for small ruminants but not cattle)

Sino-Tibetan expansion: a new model IV

- Tibetic speakers undergo a major expansion (when?) assimilating linguistic diversity on the Plateau
- Rice invades the lowland vegecultural zones rather later, pushing taro into residual systems
- Groups such as early Burmic spread southwards, fragmenting Austroasiatic-speaking peoples

Mapping the Sino-Tibetan Expansion



Synthesis I

- In the light of this, what can be said about the transition from foraging to farming in NE India?
- The linguistic evidence points to this being very recent in some areas with residual foraging continuing to play a major role in subsistence.
- It suggests that the underlying production system was dependent on a semi-wild livestock species, the mithun, and vegetative crops which were also partly wild.
- This pattern has been obscured by the introduction of humid-zone cereals and the panoply of livestock species characteristic of SE Asia.

Synthesis II

- The evidence is that many of the pathways to domestication were indigenous until the coming of rice, as is suggested by the lack of widespread vernacular terms for crops.
- This type of hypothesis is no substitute for rigorous archaeobotany and the excavation of well-dated stratified sites across the region and it is to be hoped that these will be undertaken in the coming years.

THANKS

To the Kay Williamson Educational Foundation for fieldwork support

To Mark Post, Yankee Modi, Tia Toshi Jamir, the Abbot of Tawang Monastery, Jiken Bomjin and Jummar Koyu