

NE Indian languages and the origin of Sino-Tibetan

*16th Himalayan Languages
Symposium*

2-5 September 2010

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Assumptions about proto-Sino-Tibetan I

- Proto-Sino-Tibetan is here considered as Sinitic + all remaining languages within the phylum. Despite the implicit assumption of a primary split with ‘Tibeto-Burman’ there is *no* published evidence to support such a view.
- The claim here is that Sinitic has been set apart for cultural and other non-linguistic reasons.
- Related to this is the conventional reconstruction of proto-Sino-Tibetan which assumes its speakers were fully settled agriculturalists, with a wide range of livestock and crop species, and using iron [!] tools.
- The approved list of starred forms makes no sense with the known archaeology of the region. If the reconstruction process allows you to produce false positives, as it were, then it is hard to have confidence in items with credible semantics.

Sino-Tibetan



Assumptions about proto-Sino-Tibetan II

- However, even if it is to be simply 'inside' Tibeto-Burman its position is far from certain. It is certain that there is no convincing model of the internal structure of Sino-Tibetan, as both JAM/GVD admit.
- How is it then possible to have long lists of PTB reconstructions? The answer is simple; it isn't. If you cannot attribute a starred form to a genetic node with credible evidence this is junk science.
- Similar issues apply to arguments concerning the homeland of Sino-Tibetan. The foothills of the Himalayas are a common proposal. This seems to be a sort of 'centre of gravity' argument; it is where we assume the diversity is greatest; an assumption which may well be false.

A new approach

- ❑ However, much new information has become available concerning the languages of NE India, in particular those of Arunachal Pradesh.
- ❑ It is clear that although these languages have conventionally been classified as Sino-Tibetan, they are very different from one another and the evidence for their genetic affiliation is tenuous at best.
- ❑ Moreover, many populations in Arunachal Pradesh were foragers until recently and show no evidence of a deep-level agricultural vocabulary.

A new approach II

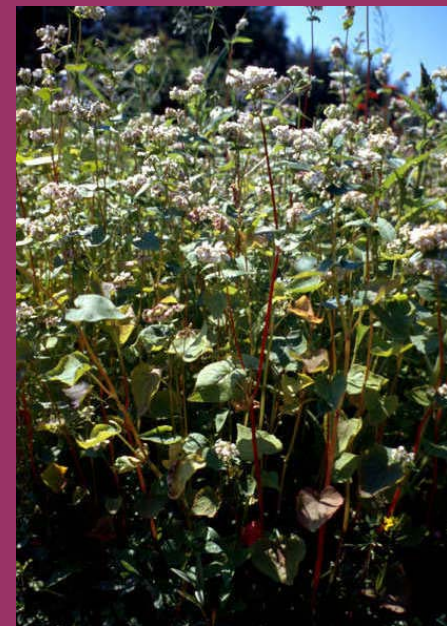
- ❖ The paper will consider two non-exclusive possibilities; that we have been wrong about the classification of languages such as Puroik [Sulung], Bugun and Sherdukpen and that they are in fact isolates with Sino-Tibetan loans;
- ❖ or that the earliest speakers of Sino-Tibetan languages were in fact hunter-gatherers, and the claims concerning reconstruction of the lexicon of subsistence are erroneous.
- ❖ The approach begins by;
 - ❖ demonstrating reasons for scepticism concerning both 'ecological' and 'agricultural' reconstructions
 - ❖ And then asks what the NE Indian evidence can contribute

'Snow' and 'ice' and a Himalayan origin

- Dempsey (1997) may have been the first author to consider the terms for 'snow' and 'ice' as relevant to the quest for an ST homeland. However, he gives no actual data.
- Tables of all the words I have been able to collect are posted on my website
- *If* a language phylum originated in a region where these were common there would be a deep-seated and well-diffused root. And indeed there is a claimed PTB **khyam* (suspiciously similar to Burmese).
- But of 190 languages and dialects collated there are some 40% unidentifiable forms, the remainder assigned to some ten different roots, each of low frequency.
- Which points strongly to this being a concept post the stage of PST

Buckwheat: A high altitude crop

- Buckwheat is the most important crop of the mountain regions above 1600 m both for grain and greens and occupies about 90% of the cultivated land in the higher Himalayas.
- There are two species of domestic buckwheat, 'bitter' buckwheat (*Fagopyrum tartaricum*) which is cold and high altitude tolerant and occurs wild throughout the Tibetan plateau
- while 'sweet' buckwheat (*F. esculentum*) restricted to the eastern Plateau and some hills in Yunnan and Sichuan
- As buckwheat is a high-altitude crop, etyma often disappear when populations migrate to lowland areas.



Buckwheat: vernacular names

- The linguistic evidence is somewhat exiguous but points to two foci of spread, one from Sinitic [or at least in China], the other from an unknown source language in the Himalayas.
- The China nucleus may have had an original form something like Burmish *#khjau*, and probably corresponds to 'sweet' buckwheat
- The Himalayish form is *#bramt-* and may correspond to 'bitter' buckwheat.
- Sources are often imprecise and sometimes the names may genuinely interchange between the two cultigens
- If it were the case that the PST represented an agricultural society in the mid-high Himalayas, we would expect the term to spread eastward. Instead the widespread term appears to come from North China

Thinking about the Sino-Tibetan tree I

- Analysis will continue, but it is reasonable to say that 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 in NE India is too exiguous and poorly transcribed. Until we have better data speculation is king.
- But we can say 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

Thinking about the Sino-Tibetan tree II

- 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
- This probably accounts for the diversity of the other minority languages in this region, such as Idu, Bugun, Sherdukpen, Lish (?), Digaro etc.
- Our existing knowledge is largely derived from descriptive but amateur accounts published in Assam by administrative officers with a Hindi-type orthography with no tone or any non-qwerty features, including non-cardinal vowel qualities, vowel length, nasalization non-standard consonants, affricate places .

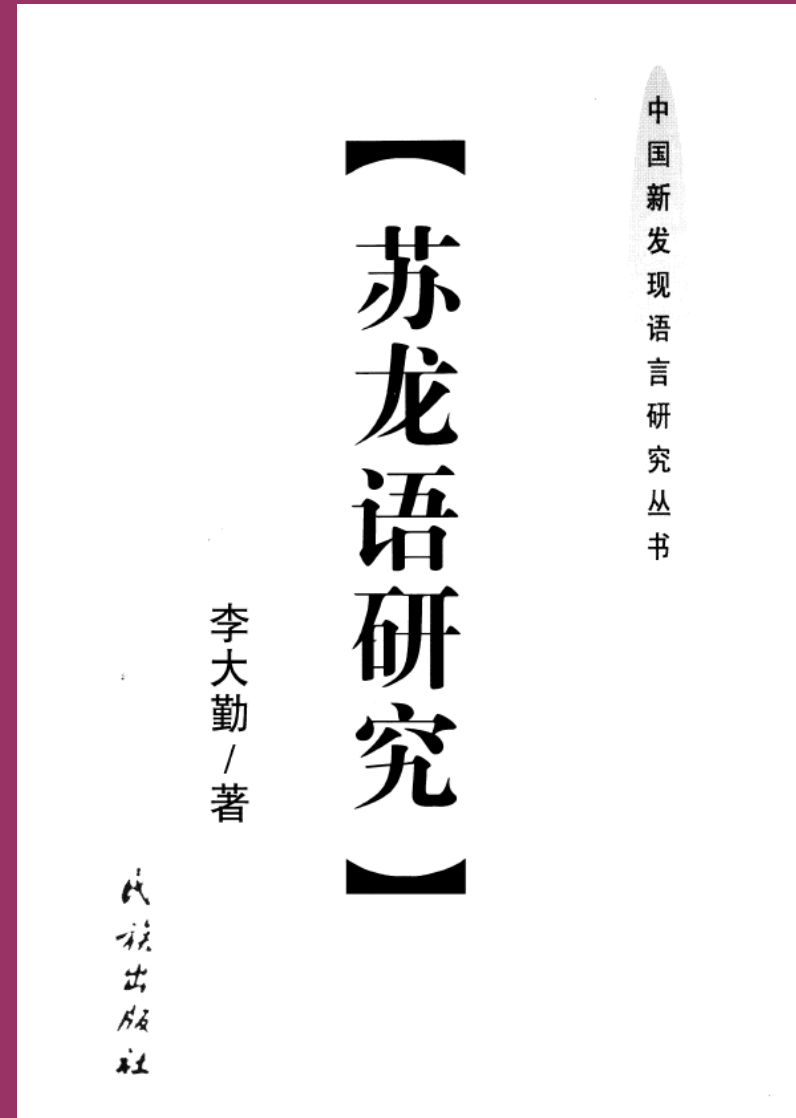
BUGUN LANGUAGE GUIDE

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Thinking about the Sino-Tibetan tree III

- The difficulties of relating these to more mainstream Sino-Tibetan has made some researchers wonder about their affiliation; are these possibly Austroasiatic or else language isolates?
- We know enough about the Austroasiatic comparative lexicon now to exclude the possibility of an Austroasiatic affiliation.
- But some or all may be language isolates with Sino-Tibetan borrowings. Much of the vocabulary is hard to identify at all, but this may be poor transcription and wrongly understood morphology



Milang: a Tani language?

- Mark Post has compared Milang with Tani and finds the following are non-cognate
- Case markers (exc. PTB Locative *la), basic verbs, numerals, body parts, kin terms, most terms denoting house parts, almost all wild and domesticated animals not mentioned above, natural environment (incl. snow), insects, pumpkin/gourd, chilli pepper, taro, sweet potato, ginger, salt, dao, knife, arrow, quiver (bow *may* be WT-cognate), cloth/fabric/clothing, words relating to commerce/trading, words relating to spirituality, virtually all adjectives.
- Proving this type of negative case is always a slow and problematic task, but Arunachal may well be a linguistic diversity hotspot equivalent to Siberia

Sino-Tibetan expansion: a new model I

- The earliest speakers of Sino-Tibetan were highly diverse foragers living in an arc between the foothills of the Himalayas and Assam/Arunachal Pradesh up to 10,000 years ago
- Some spoke early Sino-Tibetan languages, others unknown languages now present only as substrates and perhaps surviving as Kusunda
- Some of these foragers became arboriculturalists (sago in NE India) by 8000 BP and shortly afterwards began to practise vegeculture (taro, plantains) and animal management (*mithun*). This complex might be identified with the Naga nucleus.
- Other diverse foraging populations remain dependent on hunting and sago



Sino-Tibetan expansion: a new model II

- Seasonal foragers exploit the high Tibetan Plateau from 7500 BP
- Perhaps 6-5000 BP 'livestock revolution' takes place. Yak herders move up and settle the Tibetan Plateau permanently.
- At roughly the same period, pig domestication takes place in China among non-Sino-Tibetan speakers
- By 5000 BP diverse early Sino-Tibetan groups spread eastwards to China. Sinitic is not a primary branch but simply one of many migratory groups



Sino-Tibetan expansion: a new model III

- Proto-Tujia, proto-Bai and probably others meet unknown populations (Hmong-Mienic? Austronesians?) with domestic pigs, while also cultivating and beginning the process of domesticating rice
- Proto-Sinitic speakers encounter early Altaic speakers with foxtail millet and other crops (buckwheat?) which they adopt along with livestock
- The Sinitic languages expand southwards, assimilating or encapsulating many small groups. They encounter Hmong-Mien speakers with rice and switch millet terminology to rice

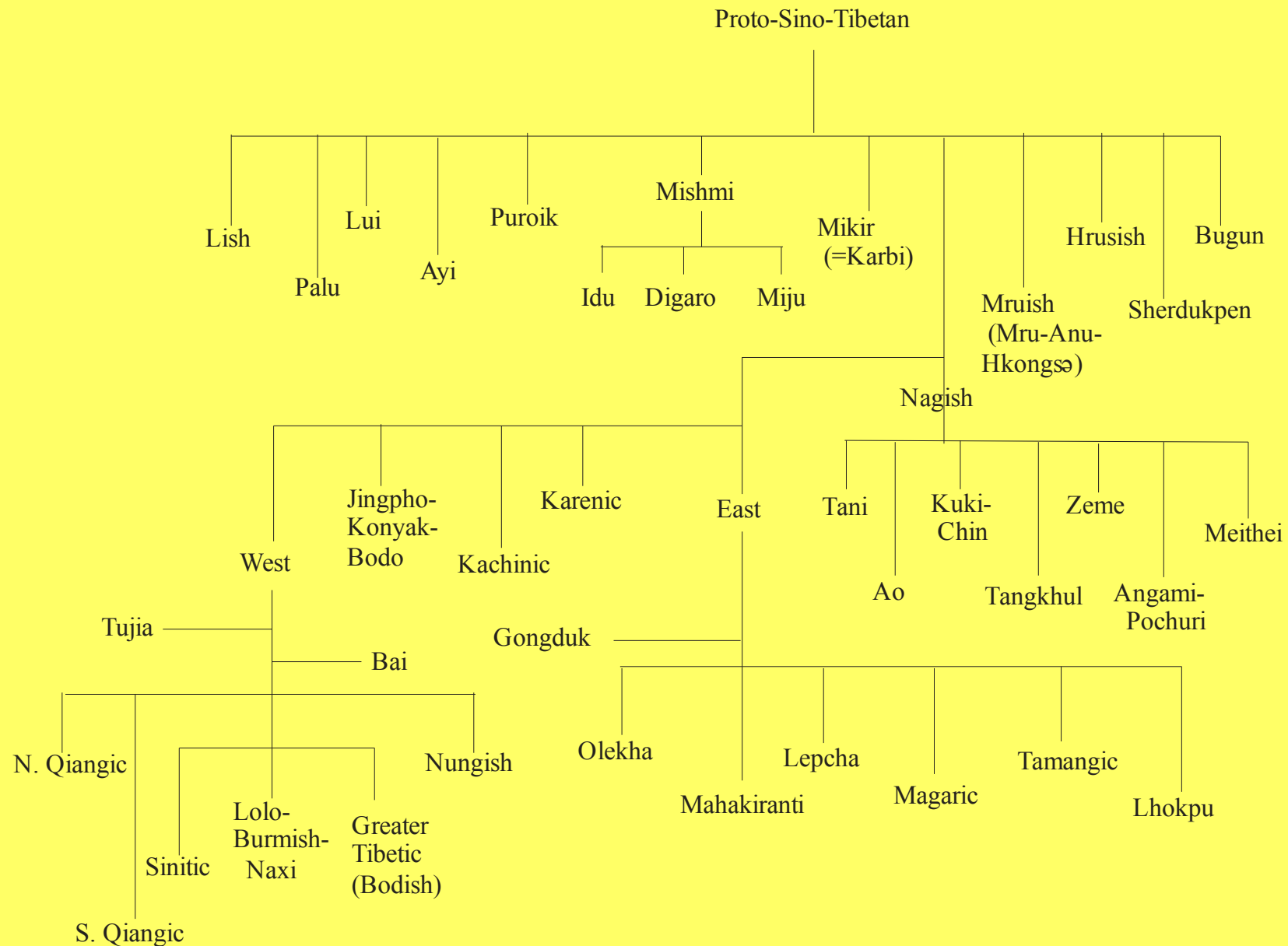
Sino-Tibetan expansion: a new model IV

- In the montane areas on the fringes of the Himalayas, cold zone cereals (buckwheat, foxtail and Panicum millets) are moved from gathering to domestication
- 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)
- Tibetic speakers undergo a major expansion (when?) assimilating prior linguistic diversity on the Plateau

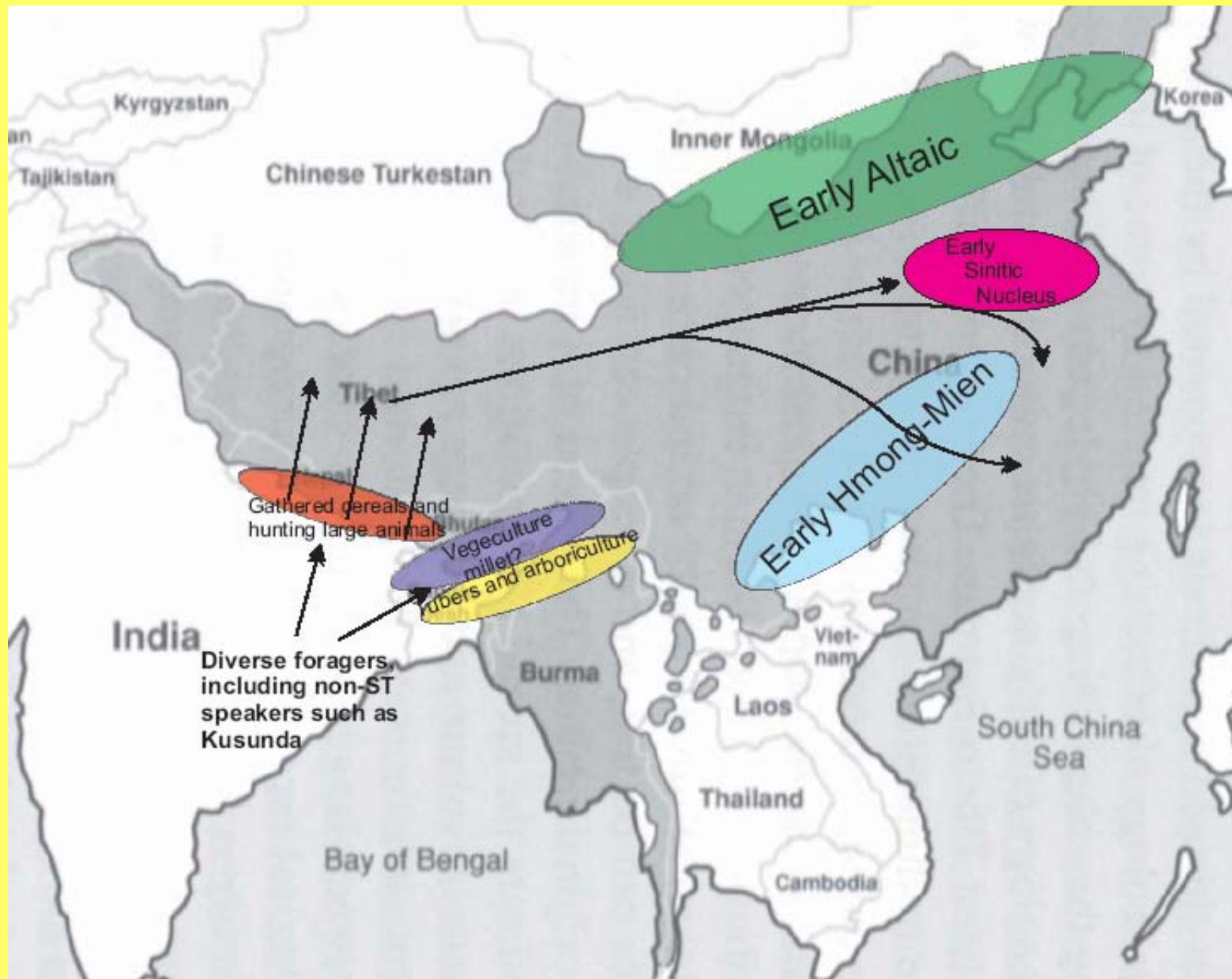
Sino-Tibetan expansion: a new model V

- Rice invades the lowland vegecultural zones very much later, pushing taro into residual systems
- Groups such as early Burmic spread southwards, fragmenting Austroasiatic-speaking peoples

Rethinking the Sino-Tibetan 'tree'



Mapping the Sino-Tibetan Expansion



What's in a name? 'Trans-Himalayan'

- If these arguments are accepted then 'Sino-Tibetan' becomes a highly inappropriate name for the phylum, privileging two low-level subgroups.
- It has been proposed to shift the term 'Tibeto-Burman' to refer to the whole phylum; but in fact the same objection applies these are also two culturally prominent subgroups of no classificatory significance
- One proposal on the table is to use the term 'Trans-Himalayan' which would capture the geographical locus of the phylum without suggesting individual sub groups
- Other suggestions are awaited

THANKS

- To Kay Williamson Educational Foundation for supporting my work and my presence here
- To the British Government for preventing Mark Post and his wife from attending
- To a wide variety of scholars for discussions over the years

