

A Commentary on the Relationship between Peninsular Malaysia and Yunnan During the Prehistoric Era

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In this article I try to address an issue that has not been said much by researchers. No direct evidence has yet been known to show the kind of relationship that existed between Peninsular Malaysia and Yunnan. Even though certain families on the East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia have traced their ancestral roots to Yunnan, they have not yet been able to furnish any documentary evidence to substantiate their claim.

The absence of direct evidence has encouraged researchers to speculate on the nature of this relationship. Their speculations are based on a number of general historical facts. Fact number one is derived from geological evidence. For instance, F.L. Dunn has successfully applied geological paradigm to reconstruct both cultural and human developments during Pleistocene and early Holocene. He believes that during the Pleistocene of Glacial Period, when the sea-level was at its lowest, mainland Asia and island Southeast Asia were united to form a big land mass and people in the mainland and island Southeast Asia belonged to a single "gene pool". This was from about 35,000 years ago till the beginning of the Holecene period, at about 11,000 to 10,000 years ago.

It is therefore reasonable to postulate that people in Peninsular Malaysia and Yunnan too can be grouped into one "gene fool". The same can be said about their culture. Both the mainland East Asia and island Southeast Asia practised similar stone age culture. They were both at the Paleolithic stage of cultural development.

After about 11,000 to 10,000 years ago both gene and cultural differentiation began to take place. The coming of the Holocene era, when the sea-level started to rise, the people living in different environments began to develop

independently. As a result "culture flow" and "gene flow" between various areas began to stop. During this period there was very little contacts between people living in different areas of mainland Asia and island Southeast Asia.

However the presence of traces of later Paolithic stone- technology or Mesolithic stone technology which are widespread in the mainland Asia and Peninsular Malaysia and Sumatra indicates the presence of the remnants of a common type of stone technology from the late Pleistocene, before the rise of the sea-level that resulted in the drowning of the Sunda and Sahul Shelves. The evidence show that the people in the mainland Asia and the Malay Peninsula shared common type of stone technology till about 5,000 B.P.

During the Neolithic period, saw the appearance of the shouldered axe and rectangular axe technologies. The shouldered axes were found in many areas from Ganges to Japan and north of the Malay Peninsula (D.G.E. Hall, - 1968: 6-7). While the rectangular axes were found in the river valleys of Hwang Ho, Yangtse, Mekong, Salween, Irrawaddy, Brahmaputra as well as throughout Indonesia (Ibid: 6). This again provides the evidence for the link between Yunnan and the Malay Peninsula: The shouldered and rectangular axes traditions have been found in their purest forms in the Malay Peninsula and South Sumatra. The spread of two types of axes has been ascribed by certain group of scholars as the evidence for the spread of the Austro-Asiatic languages.

Von Heine-Gelden and his group, Vienna school of thought, identified the spread of the shouldered axe with the culture of the Mon-Khmer (Ibid: 7) peoples of the mainland Southeast Asia and the rectangular axe with the speakers of the Austronesian language. But scholars such as Van Heekeren has warned against associating the spread of languages with cultural waves and cultural migrations. They believe that there is no evidence to associate the two phenomena. It is true that sometime the distribution of the rectangular axe technology did coincide with that of the Austronesian languages (Ibid: 7).

I am not sure how far Yunnan can be associated with the rectangular axe culture as well as the shouldered axe culture. But if it is true that both the shouldered axes and the rectangular axes that are found in Peninsular Malaysia are found in Yunnan as indicated by archeologists then Yunnan and Peninsular Malaysia during the Neolithic period experienced a similar cultural development. There is, however, the basic differences. The people of the island Southeast Asia are the Melayu-Polynesian speakers and the same was true with the Cam in Vietnam and Kamboja but the language of the Yunnan people during the Neolithic period needs to be investigated.

The Melayu-Polynesian speakers are believed, by some scholars, to have migrated into Southeast Asia several centuries before the beginning of the Christian era. Their influences are found throughout Southeast Asia and also as far as Madagascar in the West and Easter Island in the East. F. and P.E. Sarasin (1905) suggested that the migrations followed two main waves. The first were the Proto-Malays bringing an advanced Neolithic Culture and the second were the Deutro-Malays who brought the bronze-iron technology.

According to Hendrik Kern, on the linguistic evidence the origin of these people was Champa. But Von Heine Geldern traces their origin to Western China and Yunnan can be also be included as belonging to that part of China and it is also there that the rivers of the most mainland Southeast Asia have originated. These Neolithic migrants were believed to have brought with them knowledge of wood carving, pottery making and also agriculture.

However, this theory of Heine Geldern has been questioned by many scholars working on the subject. Even scholars who believed in the migration theory such as Peter Bellwood and Solheim have modified Heine Geldern's theory with caution and took up Van Heeckerens advice that it is not right to identify culture waves or migrations with the spread of a language (H.R. Van Heekeren, 1957: 131). Bellwood has recently said "The results of archaeological and linguistic research in Southeast Asia over the past twenty years have revolutionized our understanding of prehistory, and specifically of Peninsular Malaysian prehistory. Heine Geldern (1932) was clearly wrong, whatever the overall merits of his prehistoric reconstructions, when he suggested that early Austronesians migrated from Mainland Asia through the Malay Peninsular into Indonesia. the true course of Austronesian expansion was in the other direction" (P. Bellwood, 1993: 53).

But Bennet Bronson's article with the title "Against Migration: A Negative Perspective on Population Movements in Prehistoric Southeast Asia" (Bennet Bronson, 1977) says

"Much that has needed to be said for quite some time, namely that migration theories in prehistoric Southeast Asia have been over-emphasised, that the idea of periodic population replacements in the area is unacceptable as a model of prehistoric developments there, and that in Southeast Asia as elsewhere, race, language and material culture have to be looked upon as completely independent of each other".

It has certainly echoed the feelings of many scholars who see the migration theory as a romantic speculation. However, they are not denying the fact that many of the Malay-speaking populations have their ancestors in Indonesia (Benjamin 1986:22; Rambo 1988). But the migrations took place during the historic time. The new immigrants settled mainly on the west coast, from Perak down to Johor.

The northern Malay states of peninsular Malaysia did not experience the coming of immigrants in recognisable numbers. And thus, it is wrong to argue for the migrations of the people into Peninsular Malaysia during the stone age periods by comparing with what happened during the historic time. It is true that during the historic time, Peninsular Malaysia receives a lot of Indian and Chinese immigrants too, but they were brought here because of the tin and rubber industries.

Another historical fact which researchers working on the origin of the people of Southeast Asia try to investigate was the migration of the Deutro-

Malays from as far north as the region of western China. These people were supposed to bring the bronze-iron culture. Indeed it is a truism that Yunnan and many parts of Southeast Asia have produced evidence of common bronze artifactual heritage in the form of the Dongson Heger I type of drums. But can this evidence be used to confirm the theory of migration of the so-called Deutro-Malays from possibly Yunnan or any other parts of western China to Southeast Asia.

In peninsular Malaysia bronze drums of the Dongson Heger I type were found in Klang in 1905, in Tembeling area, in Batu Buruk Terengganu and in Sungai Langat (Kuala Langat) Selangor. Radiocarbon datings on the samples from a wooden dugout boat (?) supporting the pair of bronze drums at Kampung Sungai Lang give three different sets of dates ranging from viz 580-390 B.C., 295-95 B.C. and AD10-190 (Leong Sau Heng, 1991.9). According to Leong Sau Heng, the first set (GX-280) dated at 2435 ± 195 by the Geochron Laboratories to be the most likely date (*Ibid*).

These sites together with several other sites: The Kuala Selinsing site; the Cist Graves site in Bernam Valley and the Jenderam Hilir site in Selangor and also the Kg. Pancu, Muar site where the Dongson type of bronze bell was found, and many other sites where metal artifacts have been found can be classified or grouped as Metal Age sites.

It has been pointed out earlier that certain scholars have identified the presence of Dongson drums and the development of Metal Age Culture in Peninsular Malaysia with the coming of the immigrants, the Deutro-Malays. But quite a number of scholars have not been convinced by the theory. There is no evidence to support such a belief (D.G.E. Hall, 8). According to Hall (*Ibid*.) Duyvendak not only denies categorically that there were two migrations of Malay peoples into Southeast Asia, but asserts that a knowledge of metals was brought to elements of the coastal population through trading contacts with foreigners. The culture originated in China and Tongkin in about 3000 B.C. and in the Chinese *Chien Han Shu* there is authentic evidence of the coastal barter through which it came to the lands to the south.

Many archeologists working on the pre history of peninsular Malaysia would agree with Hall that a knowledge of metal technology was brought to Peninsular Malaysia through trading contacts rather than through migrations. The currently much favoured view is that most cultural and biological developments in the Peninsular Malaysia were *sui generis*. F.L. Dunn was among the supporter of this view. In his monograph *Rain Forest Collectors and Traders* (1975), he tries to reconstruct the pre history, and protohistory of the Malay Peninsula by looking at the internal development first and tries to explain the changes that took place in the context of continuity and change in the historical developments by applying factors such as trade and 'sea-faring' capabilities.

Another scholar, Leong Sau Heng, following the footsteps of her teacher B.A.V. Peacock, also tries to explain the changes in the context of *sui generis*. She traces the origins and development of ports in the Malay Peninsular from the late pre history to her sites where the Dongson drums were found in Kuala

Terengganu can be classified as "feederpoint" by virtue of its location in relation to the source of raw metal ores found in the Ulu of Terengganu and Pahang. Besides the "feederpoints" there were the "secondary ports" and "entreports". The "entreports" were the city-kingdoms located at various strategic locations along the east-west trade route.

This *sui generis* approach to explain the development of culture as propagated by these scholars highlighted the view of scholars with similar belief. The acceptance of this *sui generis* approach by these scholars would made the hypothetical belief that Peninsular Malaysia was peopled through the process of migrations from as far place as Yunnan insignificant.

In view of the fact that there are scholars who are doubtful enough to accept the idea of expansions of people into the Peninsula from other regions, it is necessary, therefore, to have the migration theory elucidated further. As far as the relationship between Yunnan and the Malay Peninsula is concerned, the people of the two areas and the rest of Southeast Asia are believed to share some degree of common ancestry. Peter Bellwood has this to say

"If Southeast Asia is defined prehistorically to include China south of the Yangtze, then all populations . . . are entirely Southeast Asia in origin and probably share some degree of common ancestry in the final resort" (1993:54).

However in the light of the available archaeological evidence at this moment it is quite impossible to try to explain the relationship between Yunnan and the Peninsula. It is hoped that future researchers will try to look at the issue by digging up more evidence.

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