A CRITIQUE OF THE ALTAICIZATION HYPOTHESIS *

I. INTRODUCTION

In an important paper "Language Diffusion on the Asian Continent", (1) M. Hashimoto has argued that the modern Chinese dialects from North to South represent a continuum from an Altaic to a Tai type of structure, a continuum found at the phonological, morphological and syntactic levels. He further considers that Chinese has been undergoing a continuous change from the Tai to the Altaic type since the beginning of its history (Altaicization), and attributes the presence of Altaic features to diffusion from the Altaic languages, which are spoken to the North and Northwest of the Chinese-speaking area. Tai (1976) presents more fully and explicitly the word order aspects of the Altaicization account.

We must immediately point to an area of Hashimoto's theory where he is somewhat less than clear (or perhaps just non-committal). It is uncertain whether he attributes the Tai-type features of the Southern dialects to be likewise due to diffusion or to the more faithful preservation of the typological features of Proto-Chinese. He does appear,

(1) M. Hashimoto (1976). In what follows I shall refer to this article simply by page number.

(*) This paper is based on Bennet 1978: ch. 4. I am grateful to David Bennett and Paul Thompson for their comments on earlier versions, but any errors are to be laid at my door.

Cah. de Ling. Asie Orientale n° 6 Septembre 1979, pp. 91-104
though, to favour the latter view, since he makes no reference to "Taiization" and writes at one point (55) as if he believes both the Tai and Miao-Yao languages to be related to Chinese within the Sino-Tibetan family.

The question of whether Chinese and Tai are genetically related is a controversial one which is still the subject of dispute. I shall adopt here as somewhat more convincing than its rivals Benedict's view that the currently-available evidence does not constitute proof of a Sino-Tai relationship. Benedict confines the Sino-Tibetan stock to three sub-families, Chinese, Karen and Tibeto-Burman. Rather than include the Tai languages in Sino-Tibetan, Benedict (1942, 1966) places them in an enormous Austro-Thai family (which I shall spell "Austro-Tai") which also includes the Austro-Miao-Yao languages and a smaller grouping which he terms Kadai. As for the Miao-Yao languages, he tends (1972 : 3) to regard them as constituting another major branch of Austro-Tai.

There is between Chinese and Tai a fair amount of shared vocabulary, including lexical items which are already attested in Archaic Chinese (cf. Li 1976 and Manomaivibool 1976). Benedict, however, points out that these items are not part of the "core vocabulary" and therefore cannot be assumed to be descended from a Proto-Sino-Tai. Moreover, practically none of them has cognates in Tibeto-Burman (1967 : 278), which suggests that they are not native to Sino-Tibetan and hence not native to Chinese. He argues in fact that the forms in question represent very early loans into Chinese from some unknown Austro-Tai language which was spoken by a culture technologically far superior to that of the Chinese. These loans and this cultural contact must have occurred before the Oracular Chinese period.

2. THE EVIDENCE EXAMINED

2.1. TONES

Hashimoto correctly notes (50) that, as a general tendency, the further South one goes in China, the more tonal categories a dialect has. He continues:

One would naturally associate this phenomenon with the presence of tone language like Tai to the South, but Altaic languages to the North which do not have the type of syllabic musical tones like those of Chinese, Tai, etc. (51)

The use here of the vague expression "associate with" leaves open the possibility that the multitude of tones in the South might be due either to a retention of past features of Chinese or to Tai influence. The former explanation is unlikely to be tenable, however, since the further one goes back into the history of Chinese, the fewer tones there seem to be: Archaic Chinese apparently had just two basic tones (Benedict 1972 : 195). If the latter explanation is resorted to, then one is dealing with Taization not Altaicization. It is certainly not the case that the history of tone in Chinese can be viewed as a change from a Tai to an Altaic type of structure.

One last point should be made before we leave tone: Matisoff (1973b) suggests that the Tai languages acquired tonal systems as a result of in-