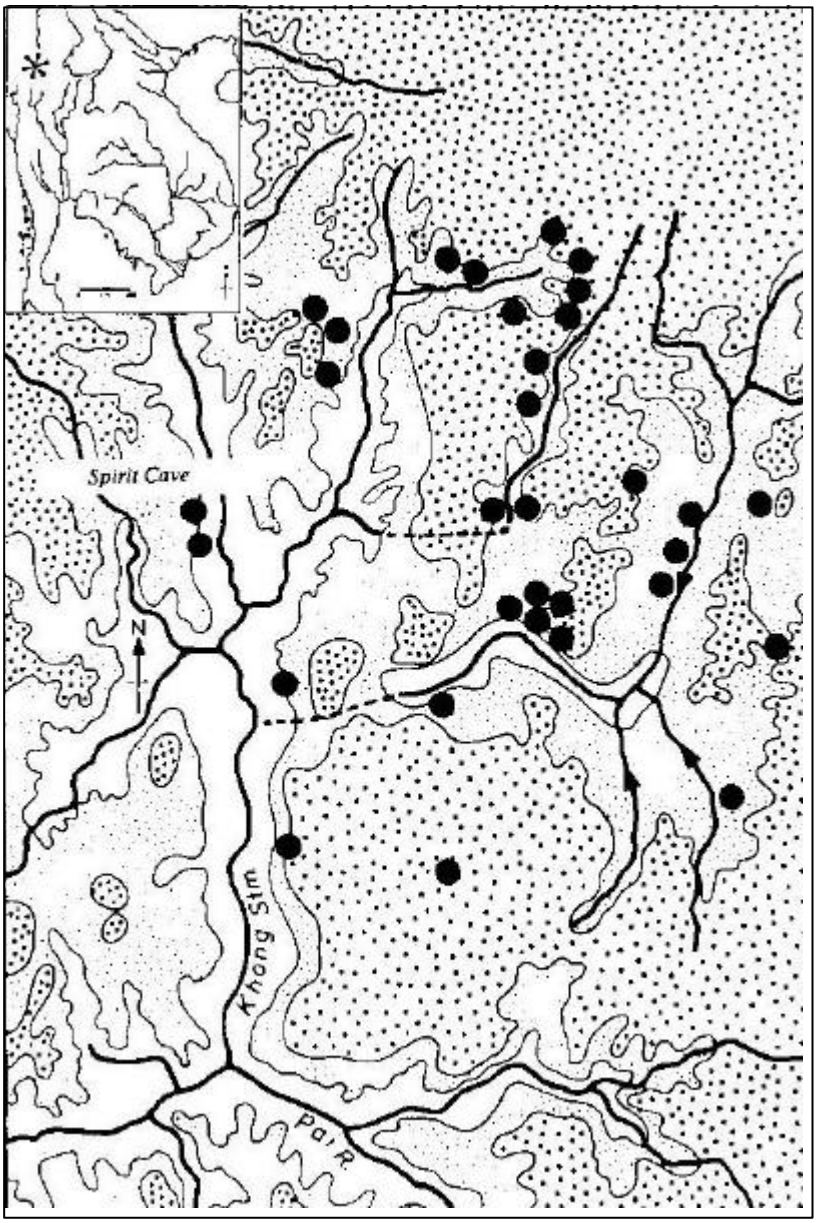
2-Societies and Economies

The Mountains and Mountain People

Reading: Charles Higham, *The Archaeology of Mainland Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989) chapter 2§2 pages 45-61 EUL DS 523 Hig

The plains and mountains provide the basic contrast between two distinct modes of human adaptation. Unfortunately the mountain peoples, who had and continue to have a quite distinct political, social and economic identity from the peoples of the plains, have attracted very little attention from the archaeologists and historians. The only systematically investigated settlements inhabited by such peoples are a series of sites - cave shelters in the North Thai uplands excavated by Chester Gorman in the 1960s and 1970s (map 2.1)- occupied by hunter-gatherers over the millennia prior to 900 AD. All the sites including the last occupied – the Banyan valley caves, which continued in use to ca 900AD and beyond – reflect the diverse character of the resource base within which they were located – a wet evergreen canopied forest with access to water resources. Within this environment the population sought plants, reptiles, fish, crabs, shellfish, land snails and small forest mammals. Local bamboo was shaped to make single-edged implements used to process animal remains and stone tools were employed to shape wood. Twine, poison and resinous gums, with bamboo, served to make traps. For millennia, these mountain peoples opted for elevated rock shelters distant from the mosquito-infested lowland plains for part, if not all of their activities. Their lengthy occupation in the uplands, displayed by their transient use of rock shelters, moreover, suggests that these hunter-gathers maintained attained a position of equilibrium with the environment within which they existed. That environment, moreover, created a self-sustaining affluent society, which though poor in material goods, enjoyed a sustenance that, it has been suggested, was equivalent to that of the Mid-western, population of the twentieth-century USA.

This was a society, which displayed a long-term adaptation to the sub-tropical, wet evergreen forest. In this forest type, the insulation provided by the dense canopy, ensured a ground-level humidity and temperature which was much more stable than under deciduous cover or following forest clearance. In the prevailing monsoon conditions here, as has been suggested in the first seminar, there was a dry season, but its impact was muted and its duration diminished in the higher altitude, wet monsoon forest. There was accordingly a regular succession of available foods. Even at the difficult times at the end of the dry season, there were still the stream resources and game animals to provide food. Gorman indeed has shown that shellfish were collected in both wet and dry seasons. Such an environment was thus characterised by a wide diversity of food sources, within which the population did not have to depend on any one specific plant or animal, or indeed employ any one specific technique of food procurement. There was a constant process of change and innovation, which favoured long-term social stability. As the evidence provided by the three rock shelters suggests, groups of hunter-gatherers were, at least seasonally small in numbers and accustomed to regular movement within their territory. These territories provided them, over the millennia to at least 900 AD and perhaps beyond, with a broad-spectrum subsistence, which made them perhaps “the original affluent society”.



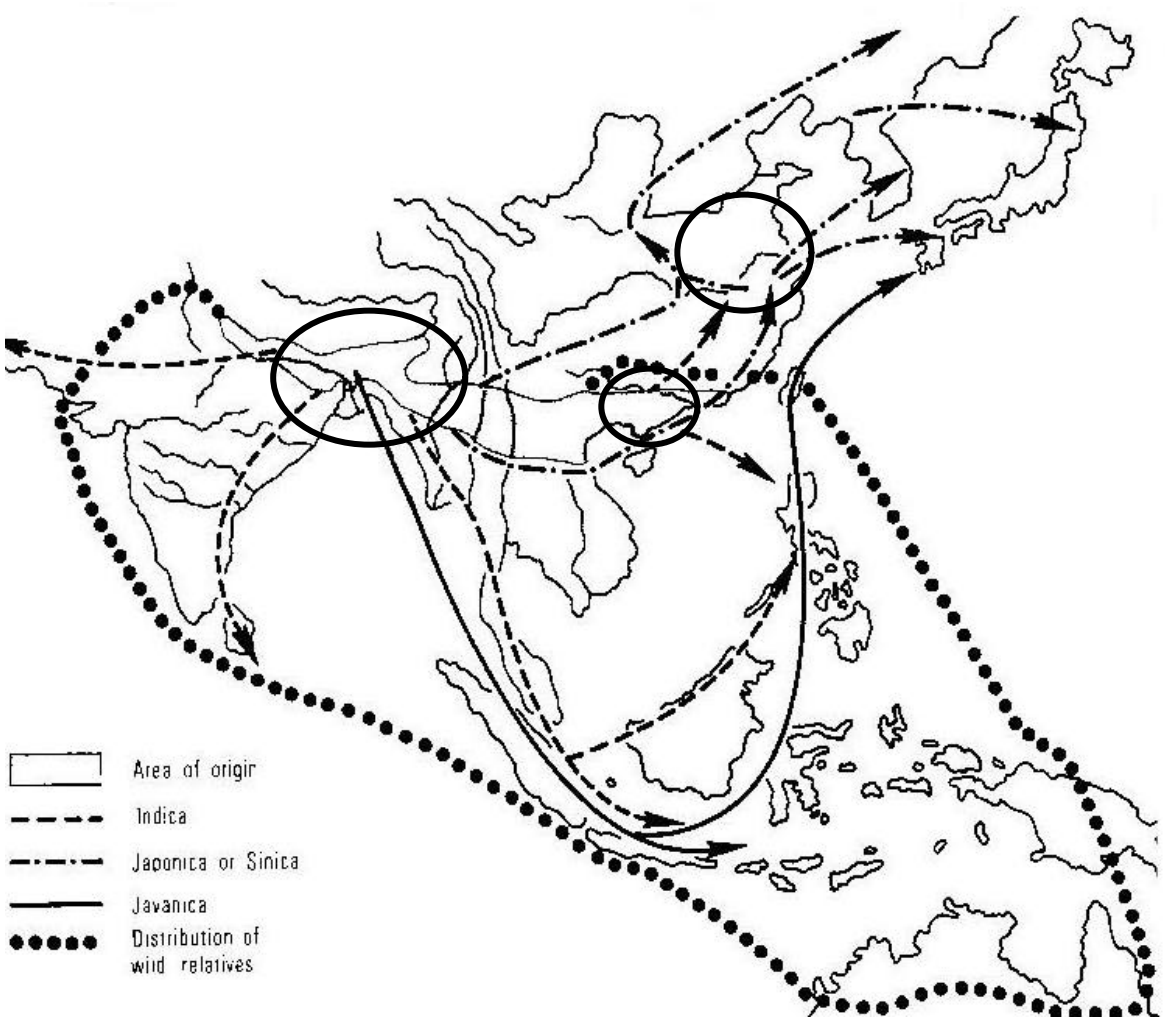
Map 2.1 North-Thai Cave Shelters

The Plains: Agriculture, Village Life and Rice Cultivation

Reading: Charles Higham, *The Archaeology of Mainland Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989) chapter 2§1 pages 33-43; chapter 3 pages 92-189. EUL DS 523 Hig; Paul Wheatley, *Nagara and Commandry Origins of Southeast Asian Urban Traditions* (Chicago: UC, Dept. of Geography, Research Papers Nos. 207-208, 1983), chapter 2§6, pages 82-89. EUL HT147.A785 Whe

Turning to the extensive river or lacustrine plains of the Mekong, Red and Chao Phraya Rivers and the Khorat Plateau, which today sustain the greatest concentrations of population, these, at least until ca 600-400BC, were largely avoided by the local populations. This was in part a result of the presence of low levels of malarial mosquitoes. It was also due to recurrent flooding as a result of changing sea levels, a process, which is greatly magnified by forest clearance. Only

when a new technology-complex evolved, leading to the adoption of wet rice cultivation in levelled fields, did these lands attract settlement. During the epoch, encompassing General Periods A (3600-1500 BC) and B (1500-300BC), such settlements were usually found on slightly elevated ground, adjacent to tracts of low terrace soil in the middle courses of tributary streams. Here wild rice could be found in a swampland environment and its development enhanced by the judicious clearance of competing vegetation. Proximity to water was equally important for people as well as domesticated livestock- cattle pigs and dogs, all of which were eaten- whilst flooded terrain provided a rich source of aquatic species, fish, shellfish, amphibians and reptiles. All sites of this period, which normally occupied ca 5 ha, are set back from the zone of maximum flooding, in an environment where the populations could harvest rice and exploit both the forest fringe and aquatic fauna. Yet there is as yet no sign whatsoever, of settlement at this time on the more elevated high terraces. Nor is it found on the floodplains of the major rivers or lakes.



Map 2.2

Diffusion of “Wet-Paddy” Technology Complex

It was only, with the advent of iron technology in the first millennium BC, that the wet-*paddy* technology complex was elaborated, a development facilitated by the harnessing of the traction power of the water buffalo. As a result cultivation and settlement extended onto on the floodplains of the major rivers or lakes. The evidence for this change, dating from the transition between General Periods B (1500-300BC) and C (300BC-250 AD), comes largely from Thailand, where reasonably thorough surveys have failed to locate a single pre-metal age site on the central plain. Yet sites associated with that the wet-*paddy* technology complex and the advent of bronze/iron technology, have been excavated in the riverine lowlands of Lopburi and Chansen in the heart of the central Thai lowlands. Similar developments, moreover, have been recorded from several localities in the broad, alluvial-floored valleys of Khorat. Already therefore before the dawning of the Christian Era, "wet-*paddy*" had become a crop of considerable importance in appropriate ecological niches, though its precise extent has still to be established. Beyond the borders of these lands, however, the diffusion process may only be tentatively delineated (map 2-2). During General Periods C (300BC-250 AD) and D (250-1000 AD) however, "wet-*paddy*" was established in each of the extensive river or lacustrine plains of the Mekong, Red and Chao Phraya Rivers and the Khorat Plateau

The unit of settlement in these regions was the village, often a collection of stilted houses, dependent for a substantial part of its subsistence on the produce of its "wet-*paddy*" fields, but also drawing heavily on gardens and multi-storeyed groves of fruit trees disposed around the settlement. The highest storey comprised mainly coconut crowns, pinnate fronds of areca and usually somewhat apart were the heads of sugar palm. At successively lower levels, rambutans, mangosteens, bananas, bamboo, sugar cane and yams formed a dense thicket of vegetation. This integration of a relatively "new" wet-*paddy* technology complex with an "older" "mixed – gardening" provided an enduring eco-system, which continues to the present day.