

# A response to Kushim Jiang, “Preliminary proposal to encode the Tai Khao script in UCS”

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## 1 Summary

I support the proposal. I have found it technically accurate. I would like to make a few recommendations, which I have itemized below.

## 2 Phonological background

Some readers may find it helpful to have a comparison of the phonology of Tai Dón with Tai Dam. In addition to my own study of the Tai Dam language, my principal sources are Gedney, Diêu and Donaldson, and Fippinger. (See the bibliography section below.)

### 2.1 Initial consonants

The consonant repertoire for Tai Dón is similar to that for Tai Dam, but includes several voiceless aspirated consonants that Tai Dam does not have, as shown by comparing Tables 1 and 2.

	Labial	Alveolar	Palatal	Velar
Voiceless stops	/p/	/t/	/tɕ/	/k/
Voiceless aspirated stops	/p <sup>h</sup> /	/t <sup>h</sup> /	/tɕ <sup>h</sup> /	/k <sup>h</sup> /
Voiceless fricatives	/f/	/s/		/x/

**Table 1: Tai Dón voiceless consonants**

	Labial	Alveolar	Palatal	Velar
Voiceless stops	/p/	/t/	/tɕ/	/k/
Voiceless aspirated stops		/t <sup>h</sup> /		
Voiceless fricatives	/f/	/s/		/x/

**Table 2: Tai Dam voiceless consonants**

### 2.2 Vowels

Tai Dón has 10 vowels. Tai Dam has the same 10 vowels, plus three vowel glides not found in Tai Dón. See Tables 3 and 4.

	Front	Central	Back
High	/i/	/ɨ/	/u/
Mid	/e/	/ə/	/o/
Low	/ɛ/	/a/	/ɔ/
Low, long		/aː/	

**Table 3: Tai Dón vowels**

	Front	Central	Back
High	/i/	/i/	/u/
Glide	/iə/	/iə/	/uə/
Mid	/e/	/ə/	/o/
Low	/ɛ/	/a/	/ɔ/
Low, long		/a:/	

**Table 4: Tai Dam vowels**

## 2.4 Tones

I am having difficulty matching the proposal’s tone description with that from Điêu and Donaldson. I’d like to discuss this further with the author. However, this matter should not affect the number of tone marks encoded, or the Unicode proposal.

## 2.5 Cognates

When a Tai Dón word starts with an aspirated stop, the corresponding Tai Dam word will often use a fricative for the initial consonant. On the other hand, when a Tai Dam word has a vowel glide, the Tai Dón will usually use the corresponding mid vowel. Example: Tai Dam: /fuə<sup>h</sup>/, Tai Dón: /p<sup>h</sup>o<sup>h</sup>/, ‘husband’.

## 3 In support of a separate script for Tai Khao

In the past, I envisioned expanding the Tai Viet script to include all symbols used in Tai Dam, Tai Dón, and Tai Daeng. However, the great variation in “script dialects” is daunting. While many of the differences can be described as stylistic variations, there are several instances where the mapping between grapheme and phonemes is skewed in one language versus the other. For example:

	Tai Dam	Tai Dón Kushim Jiang	Tai Dón Điêu and Donaldson
/m/, high series			
/p/, high series			
/f/, high series			

**Table 5: Comparison of the high series /m/, /p/, and /f/ in Tai Dam and Tai Dón**

As we can see here, the TAI VIET LETTER HIGH PO is used for the high series /p/ in Tai Dam, but for the high series /m/ in Tai Dón. Likewise, the TAI VIET LETTER HIGH FO most closely resembles the Tai Dón high /p/, while Tai Dam (as reflected in the Tai Viet script) has no symbol corresponding to the Tai Dón high /f/.

This skewing of how characters are mapped to phonemic values greatly complicates the problem of stylistic variations. However, if Tai Viet and Tai Khao are disunified, the skewing problem disappears. The remaining stylistic variations which exist in Tai Khao are straightforward, and if desirable, could be dealt with by simply listing alternate glyphs for the affected characters.

## 4 Recommendations

### 4.1 Stylistic variations

It appears to me that the character styles used in the proposal are primarily influenced by the usage among the Jinping Tai. That may be understandable, if the script is being widely used among the Jinping, and is dying out in Vietnam. But the name chosen for the script, Tai Khao, is a Vietnamese translation of “White Tai”, implying that it is also intended for use in Vietnam. Furthermore, Lai Chau province in northwestern Vietnam is the center of the Tai Dón population. So it would seem that at least some accommodation to the Lai Chau style should be made. If it seems best to use the Jinping style for the representative glyphs in the proposal, we should at least document the Lai Chau style as alternate presentation forms.

### 4.2 Vowel names

Regarding the names of xx30 and xx31: The low central vowel is the one vowel on which both Tai Dón and Tai Dam have length contrast. The character proposed as xx30 is used to write the long /a:/, and is common through all of the Tai scripts. In Romanizations it is often expressed as “aa”. In the Tai Viet block, this character is encoded as U+AAB1, and is named TAI VIET VOWEL AA. The characters proposed as xx3B..xx42, on the other hand, all represent the short /a/, often expressed as “a”, plus a final consonant. Finally, if my own research is correct, the character proposed as xx31 represents /a:/ with a low tone and a final glottal. Thus, I would recommend the following names for xx30 and xx31:

- xx30, TAI KHAO MAI KAA
- xx31, TAI KHAO MAI KAAK

I believe these names would more accurately reflect the phonemic value of these characters. They would also be more consistent with the naming conventions we used in Tai Viet, although that is secondary.

## Bibliography

Điêu Chính Nhìem and Jean Donaldson. 1970. *Păp San Khhâm Pák Tây-Keo-Eng (Ngũ-Vùng Thái-Việt-Anh, Tai-Vietnamese-English Vocabulary)*. Saigon.

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