Paul Sidwell and Mathias Jenny

Preface

The present volume began early in 2017 when Sidwell was approached by deGruyter to edit a volume for their *World of Linguistics* (WoL) series. Some years before a volume had been initiated for the series which would ambitiously encompass both East Asia (EA) and Mainland Southeast Asia (MSEA), and some ten individuals had undertaken to contribute as editors, sub-editors, and authors. That project eventually stalled, was effectively abandoned, and had to be rethought; the intended scope was too great, and most of the intended authors had directed their attention to other things before any progress could be achieved.

Handbooks such as these are not simple projects; they require goodwill and stamina from all involved. The editors must persuade enough suitable authors to coalesce around the plan in a reasonable timeframe, and all this is done by academics who by and large already have jobs taking the bulk of their waking hours, and who agree to assume additional responsibilities for no additional compensation. To be sure, there is some prestige associated with the publication, yet the more senior the scholar, the more diluted that value becomes. In this case it seems that the challenges were excessive.

The suggestion that subsequently emerged was to divide the scope and propose EA and MSEA volumes, and Sidwell was approached to edit the latter. He had previously edited the Brill *Handbook of Austroasiatic Languages* (2014) with Mathias Jenny, and after some discussions Jenny came on board to jointly edit the new WoL volume.

The new editors' initial vision was rather different from what you see today. At first we imagined broad typological chapters, followed by sketch grammars of selected languages highlighting the features described in the typological discussions. A number of potential authors signed on to provide sketches but after discussions with the publisher we pivoted the plan to the table of contents you see now. Rather than sketches of specific languages, the focus is on genealogical and areal language groups with no one chapter devoted to a single language – this provides for more comprehensive coverage while putting languages into context. The chapters of the volume are arranged into six sections under the following themes:

1. Deep history of the peoples and languages of MSEA
2. History of linguistics of MSEA
3. Language classification
4. Typological profiles by areal-genetic language groups
5. Areality and contact
6. Language and society

We originally planned to have more but shorter chapters. The idea was that by restricting chapters to 10~20 pages it would be less onerous on authors and encourage timely submissions. However, as time passed the working plan was substantially adjusted. Some chapters needed to be longer to cover the material, and consequently several were merged and others lengthened. Additionally, as we began with a long list of planned chapters, we were able to adjust as a number of authors withdrew and we had scope to adjust the table of contents. The final result is a mix of long and short chapters with a breadth coverage over six sections. Overall we have endeavoured to ensure that the content reflects not just what we know about MSEAn languages, but also the various scholarly traditions, theoretical approaches, transcription methods, and the varied historical paths as the field has emerged. While today much MSEAn linguistics is carried out in terms broadly consistent with international practices in typological and descriptive linguistics, there remain nuances of national and local traditions, and legacy effects from the long history of colonial and post-colonial national divisions.

We also decided to give special emphasis to the historical circumstances that created the MSEA language area. The first section brings together chapters from historical linguists and archaeologists that ground the work in the story of Neolithic SEAsia, which saw a great transformation from hunter-gatherer societies to cereal cultivators who eventually tamed the lowlands and built some of the world's great monumental cultures. The combination of rich eco-systems capable of supporting hunting and fishing, and high-yield agriculture, facilitated the spread of Austroasiatic languages over a vast area, and drew other peoples, speaking Tibeto-Burman, Austronesian, Kra-Dai, and Hmong-Mien languages into the region. The uplands of MSEA also functioned as refugia for peoples seeking relief from the growth of the Chinese state to the north and the emerging states of the MSEAn lowlands. Thus, an understanding of the human history of the region extending back to prehistory times is integral to interpreting the very complicated contemporary distribution of language groups and typological features. These are important clues for what they too can tell us about migration pathways, technological and cultural shifts, and histories of social interactions. Thus we have delivered a handbook of languages and linguistics that locates the material within the historical and geographical context that helps to define the language area.

The eventual completion of the volume took several years and saw significant turnover in terms of contributors. We initially approached more than 50 individuals, and more than 30 agreed to write chapters. However, as time progressed some authors withdrew and replacements were recruited. We would like to thank all of them for their contributions, their patience, and great collaboration over the last years.

We would like to thank the *Southeast Asian Linguistics Society* (SEALS) for endorsing this project at its 2017 meeting. A number of SEALS regulars subsequently contributed chapters, and two individuals, Jean Pacquement and Franklin Huffman, made financial donations towards editorial costs following an appeal made at SEALS. We would also like to thank Mark Alves for help and advice with editing. Thanks are

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