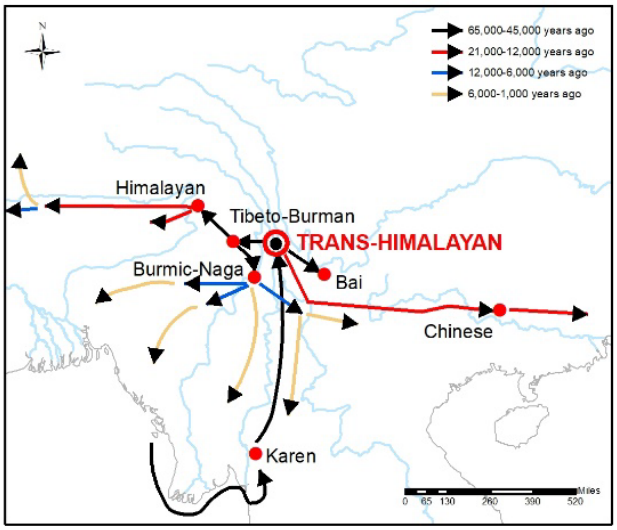
8.Trans-Himalayan

Homeland. The apparent homeland of Trans-Himalayan languages is in the highlands of Yunnan, where the valleys of the Brahmaputra, Irrawaddy, Salween, and Yangzi Rivers converge. There are also indications that a lowland region, now populated by Karen speakers, was an original node of settlement as humans moved eastward along the Indian Ocean littoral, and that settlers then moved into mountainous but productive regions.



The accompanying map displays the hypothesis that the Trans-Himalayan phylum arose from an initial settlement in the lower Salween Valley (now the homeland of Karen languages), followed by the establishment of a more substantial Trans-Himalayan homeland in the highlands. It also focuses on the early formation of Tibeto-Burman and Bai groups in the highlands, with other groups spreading west, east, and south in later times. Not shown on the map are the hypothetical movement of settlers south and west of the Himalayas who may have settled the temperate zone 45,000 years ago

Concise Spreadsheet: top four levels

Trans-Himalayan			
	Karen		
		Pa'o	
		Pwo	
			Phrae Pwo
			Pwo Western
			Pwo Eastern
		Sgaw-Bghai	
			Bghai
			Brek
			Kayah
			Sgaw
	Bai		
		Central	
		Northern	
		Southern	
	Tibeto-Burman		
		Himalayan	
			Himalayish
			Assam
		Burmic-Naga	
			Burmic
			Kachin-Kuki-Naga
	Chinese		
		Yue	
		Hakka	

		Xiang	
		Min Nan	
		Pu-Xian	
		Min-Zhong	
		Min Dong	
		Min Bei	
		Gan	
		Huizhou	
		Wu	
		Mandarin	
		Jin	

Full Spreadsheet: see "8.Trans-Himalayan," listing Trans-Himalayan languages by groups and subgroups.

Pleistocene Changes.

65,000–45,000 years ago. Speakers of Karen languages, in the lower Salween Valley, may indicate a homeland community for migrants moving eastward along the Indian Ocean. Proceeding inland to the tropical highlands of Yunnan, later generations may have founded the Trans-Himalayan homeland.

45,000–21,000 years ago. In the Yunnan highlands, Bai, Chinese, and Tibeto-Burman families took form; Tibeto-Burman subgroups later moved both west and south. Within Southeast Asia, migrants may have descended from the Yunnan highlands along the Mekong Valley and, in the lowlands of the Mekong and the Red River Valley, formed the homeland for what became the Austric phylum.

21,000–12,000 years ago. Speakers of languages ancestral to Chinese spread eastward to the Pearl River Valley. Their descendants formed other Chinese languages as they migrated northward. Those who reached the Yellow River Valley built a dense population that would later spread back to the south.

Holocene Changes.

12,000–6000 years ago. There is a clear path of westward spread of Himalayan languages along the southern foothills of the Himalayas, but also including some who crossed the mountains and settled the Tibetan Plateau. Rice cultivation, first under rain and later with irrigation, brought higher population density.

6000 years ago–1000 CE. Speakers of Burmese languages spread down the Irrawaddy Valley, overlaying previous populations.

Commentary and Debates. The ancestry and descent of Trans-Himalayan languages has been interpreted in widely differing fashions. The current fashion is to treat Trans-Himalayan as a late-comer among language families, which arose during the Holocene. Earlier work, centered on the Dene–Caucasian thesis, treats Trans-Himalayan and its ancestral languages as central to the early settlement of Eurasia and even the Americas.

According to the Dene–Caucasian thesis, articulated especially by John Bengtson, the Trans-Himalayan (or Sino-Tibetan) phylum was a major source of settlers of temperate Eurasia. Specifics to support this thesis would argue that migrants moved west from Yunnan along the well-watered Himalayan foothills to the Indus River, and turned north to follow the Khyber Pass and its extension north to the Central Asian steppes. Those moving west could form the North Caucasian phylum and continue to northern and southern Europe, where Basque language is arguably related to North Caucasian and Trans-Himalayan.

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