

[9] Correlating the Lexicon and Dispersal of Proto-Austroasiatic with the Arrival of Rice Agriculture in Mainland SEAsia

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All discussions about the origins of the Austroasiatic languages have considered the fact that an elaborate vocabulary relating to rice agriculture is reconstructable for the proto-language, and this has been interpreted as indicating a historically deep familiarity with rice. One consequence of this view has been that scholars have then tended to posit the origins of Austroasiatic in Central China or Eastern India, since we know that rice farming spread out of one or both of these areas.

Recent papers and presentations by this writer, as well as Roger Blench, have suggested that foraging, tuber-culture and fishery may have been more important to the proto-Austroasiatic speakers. Rice farming may be a later cultural innovation that was integrated into elaborated tuber-culture practices, traces of which exist to this day. In such a scenario, the incorporation of rice may have been the catalyst which sparked the expansion and diversification of Austroasiatic.

Archaeology is now converging on a date of around 4,200BP for the arrival of wet-rice agriculture in central mainland Southeast Asia. Also, serious claims are now being made that the structure of the Austroasiatic phylum is something like a flat array or simple radiation, consistent with a geographic dispersal that was relatively quick, and not so very ancient (ca. 4000 BP only).

I will argue that consequently we have strong grounds for suggesting that Austroasiatic originated in, and radiated out from Mainland Southeast Asia, after cultural interactions with rice farming peoples, probably from Southeastern China. The processes were not simple, quick or smooth, and we can see some indication of this in asymmetrical distribution of some rice related vocabulary, and internal reconstruction of specific terms suggesting a direct link to tuber-culture.