

The non-Sinitic languages of Yúnnán-Sìchuān

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This overview encompasses the provinces of Yúnnán and (parts of) Sìchuān. Situated at a meeting point between Tibet, China, and South-East Asia, this region is marked by diversity—geographic, biological, historical, cultural, ethnic and linguistic. A major dividing line between the three realms runs along the southeastern ridge of the Tibetan plateau, separating the Tibetan world to the north and northwest (see *the Non-Sinitic languages of China*), the Sinitic world to the east, and the areas of mixed Sinitic and Southeast Asian cultural influences to the south and southeast (see *the Non-Sinitic languages of South-East China*). This location of the region in the borderlands of multiple discrete realms gives it its distinctive complex and transitional characteristics.

#### Geography and climate

The region's terrain is largely mountainous. It boasts high peaks (reaching altitudes of 7,500m), deep gorges, and numerous rivers, including the Mekong (Láncāngjiāng 瀾滄江, rDza-chu), the Salween (Nùjiāng 怒江, rGyal-mo rNgul-chu), and the Yangtze (Jīnshājiāng 金沙江, 'Bri-chu). The elevation decreases from north to south, as the Qīnghǎi-Tibet plateau gives way to the Yúnnán-Guizhōu plateau. Wide latitudinal and altitudinal ranges throughout the region lead to a remarkable diversity of climatic zones, ranging from alpine cold-temperate to subtropical and tropical, and of partially isolated habitats, harboring a great variety of endemic species (Wang *et al.* 1995, Myers *et al.* 2000).

## History

The history of the region is marked by political fragmentation and rivalry over its territories by regional superpowers. The latter include the Tibetan and Chinese empires (since the 7th century) and the royal courts of Burma and Siam (since the 16th and 18th centuries). The Chinese empire obtained nominal control of most of present-day Yúnnán with the Mongol conquest of the 13th century, and of southwest Sìchuān and northwest Yúnnán after the establishment of the Sino-Tibetan border in 1727. In reality, however, the vast territory was fragmented throughout its history into a number of indigenous states, such as the Nánzhào 南詔 (A.D. 738-902) and Dàlǐ 大理 kingdoms (937-1253) of the Yí and Bái groups, the Tai kingdom Sipsongpanna (late 12th century-1911), the Tibetan kingdom of rMili (1580-1950), and remained under the local autonomous rule until well into the 20th century.

## Ethnicities

The region has the highest concentration of officially recognized ethnic groups in China. Nearly half (26 of 56) of all groups reside here. These include the Qiāng 羌, Yí 彝, Bái 白, Hāní 哈尼, Dǎi/Tai 傣, Zhuàng 壯, Miáo 苗, Lisù 傈僳, Lāhù 拉祜, Wǎ/Va 佤, Nàxī 納西, Yáo 瑤, Jǐngpō/Jinghpaw/Kachin 景頗, Tibetan 藏, Bùláng/Palaung 布朗, Bùyī/Bouyei 布依, Pǔmǐ/Prinmi 普米, Āchāng 阿昌, Nù 怒, Jīnuò 基諾, Dé'áng/Benglong 德昂, Mongolian (Mosuo) 蒙古 (摩梭), Dúlóng/Taron/Trung 獨龍. Each of these groups speaks one or more distinct languages. In addition, the region is home to three Chinese-speaking (Southwest

Mandarin) groups, the Hàn, the Huí 回, and a smaller group of Manchus 滿族. Notably, the actual number of ethnic groups which consider themselves distinct is considerably higher than those officially recognized, an issue that awaits further exploration (e.g. Bradley 1998, 2005; Sūn 2001). This extreme ethnic diversity is due to the complex migration history of the area, which for centuries served as a migration corridor for groups of four ethnic stocks: Sino-Tibetan (Tibeto-Burman and Sinitic), Tai-Kadai, Austro-Asiatic (Mon-Khmer), and Hmong-Mien. The course of migration has been consistently southward from the putative homelands of these groups in West, Central and South China. Owing to its isolation and inaccessibility from the rest of the Chinese Mainland, the arrival of Hàn-Chinese migrants into the region has been relatively late. Only after 1850 did the Hàn-Chinese become the majority in the Southwest (Lee 1983).

Most ethnic groups favor segregated concentration of settlement. Homogeneous settlements (one ethnic group per village) occur beside each other, often at different altitudes, throughout the area. This ethnic patchwork landscape characterizes, for instance, the distribution of the Jǐngpō, Zǎiwǎ 載瓦, Maru, Lashi and Bōlā 波拉 groups of southwest Yúnnán.

While multi-ethnicity and intensive contact create favorable grounds for mutual adaptation, resistance to assimilation is notable. Close contact with other groups, led most groups to develop a distinct identity manifested in ritual activities, kinship systems (e.g. the matrilineal system of the Mosuo), clothing style, specific names for themselves and others, migration history and language (Giersch 2006:148, 199, 203). This tendency is clearly observable among the local Hàn-Chinese groups, many of whom have discernable local identity, life-style, and at times even a language

(e.g. Dǎohuà 倒話) that are highly distinct from those of their closest relatives outside of the area (Ācuò 2004, Guo 2008).

## Languages

Most languages spoken in the area are Tibeto-Burman, including those of well-studied subgroups, such as Ngwi-Burmese, Himalayish, Kachinic; somewhat lesser explored Rawang/Nungish, and the controversial Qiangic. In addition, the region hosts a number of unclassified languages: heavily Sinicised Bai, Āchāng, and Nà (comprising Nàxī and Mosuo).

Mon-Khmer (Wǎ, Bùláng, Dé'áng), Tai-Kadai (Zhuàng, Dǎi) and Hmong-Mien (Miáo, Yáo) are represented less well and restricted in their distribution to the areas in the far southwest, south and southeast. All language families extend in distribution across country borders.

Overall, the region fits the profile of a residual zone (in the sense of Nichols 1991:21), as typified by: (1) high genetic diversity; (2) no clear center of innovation, (3) until recently, no lingua franca for the whole area; (4) some clear areal features (such as multiple existential verbs); and (5) some unique, cross-linguistically infrequent features (such as topography-based spatial deixis in the north and northwest). Owing to the complex migration history, the longstanding multi-ethnicity and multi-lingualism, and the intensive contact between different groups, the development of many a local language has been conditioned by language contact (e.g. LaPolla 2001, Nagano 2009). A distinctive characteristic of the local languages, as compared to their closest relatives outside of the area (if any), is increased diversity and complexity due to type transition. This tendency is best exemplified by the local

Tibeto-Burman languages, for instance, in relation to word order universals, morphological type, and case marking.

Tibeto-Burman languages are generally known for being transitional between typically OV Altaic languages to their north (SOV, postpositions; DemN, AdjN, GenN, NumN) and typically VO Hmong-Mien, Tai-Kadai and Mon-Khmer languages to their south (SVO, prepositions; NDem, NAdj, NGen, NNum) (Dryer 2008:73). Local Tibeto-Burman languages display particularly diverse and complex combinations of various implications universals, even within subgroups, for example, in the order of demonstrative and noun (Dryer 2008:74, Bradley 2010 for Ngwi-Burmese, Chirkova 2010 for southern Qiangic).

In terms of morphological type and case marking, the region is divided into: (1) synthetic languages with both inflectional and derivational morphology and paradigmatic (ergative) case marking to the north and northwest, such as Tibetan; and (2) isolating languages with mostly derivational morphology and overt (accusative) case marking only on a subset of objects, to the east and south, such as Chinese and Ngwi-Burmese. Unlike the former group, the latter group has numeral classifiers. Languages along the boundary between the two types running along the southeastern ridge of the Tibetan plateau (such as Qiangic, Ngwi, and the local Tibetan and Chinese dialects) have large feature inventories, combining characteristics of both types. This is demonstrably the case for some local Tibetan dialects developing numeral classifiers (e.g. Hé 1998:431 for Zhōngdiàn 中甸 rGyal-thang Tibetan) and some local Chinese dialects with SOV word order and related characteristics (Lǐ 2010).

Previous studies and work ahead

The remarkable linguistic diversity of the region is of particular interest for studies in language typology, language contact, and historical and comparative linguistics, but research progress is hampered by the lack of data. The regional isolation that contributed to the development and preservation of the local linguistic languages (in combination with the persisting political instability of the frontier regions) has thus far prevented the local languages and their history from being extensively explored. Few full scale descriptions of the local languages exist (e.g. LaPolla with Huang 2003, Jacques 2008, Lustig 2010) and most available information derives from grammatical sketches and word lists based on short periods of fieldwork, such as descriptions in the series *Zhōngguó Shǎoshù Mínzú Yǔyán Jiǎnzhì Cóngshū* 《中国少数民族语言简志丛书》 [Outlines of Minority Languages of China Series] and *Zhōngguó Xīn Fāxiàn Yǔyán Yánjiū Cóngshū* 《中国新发现语言研究丛书》 [New Found Minority Languages in China Series]. Further advances appear contingent upon: (1) in-depth documentation and description of the local languages; (2) comparison using a bottom-up approach, establishing one-to-one correspondences of very specific features between individual languages (cf. Stilo 2005); (3) identification of both areal features and unique regional features; and (4) greater attention to the local varieties of better studied languages with distribution also outside of the area, such as Chinese and Tibetan, for introspection into local mechanisms of contact-induced change.

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