

REVIEW OF
QIANGYŪ YANJIŪ 《羌语研究》 [A STUDY OF QIANG]
BY HUÁNG BÙFÁN 黄布凡 AND Zhōu Fāchéng 周发成
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Katia Chirkova

Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique
katia.chirkova@gmail.com

The Qiāng language occupies a privileged place among Sino-Tibetan languages spoken in China. It is one of the few languages in the area to have been uninterruptedly studied in the complexity of its dialects for almost a century by many non-Chinese and Chinese scholars, including some of the most eminent and prolific Sino-Tibetanists in China, such as Sūn Hóngkāi and Huáng Bùfán.

Linguistic fieldwork on Qiāng was pioneered by Wen Yu in the 1930's (Wen 1940, 1941) and the analysis of his data was set forth by Chang Kun in the 1960's (Chang 1967, 1968). In the 1950's, a study of Qiāng dialects became a team effort of young linguists of the Chinese Academy of Sciences. Their work has had a lasting effect on the field, for they produced the lion's share of available data on Qiāng dialects to date (e.g. Huáng Bùfán 1987, 1994, 2000; Liú 1981, 1984, 1997, 1998, 1999; Sūn 1962, 1981, 1988). Since the 1990's, native Qiāng linguists and non-Chinese scholars have joined the field, adding native command of research data and new methodology and insights (Evans 2001, 2004; Huáng Chénglóng 1994, 1997, 2000, 2003; LaPolla 2003a, 2003b; LaPolla with Huáng 2003).¹

As a result of these research efforts, recent years witnessed the publication of several in-depth descriptions of various Qiāng dialects (Liú 1998; Evans 2001; LaPolla with Huáng 2003; Huáng and Zhōu 2006). Huáng Bùfán and Zhōu Fāchéng's work, the subject of this review, stands out among these works because of the applied goals it pursues.

The collaboration between Huáng Bùfán and Zhōu Fāchéng began in the late 1980's as part of a larger project aimed at developing a writing system for the Qiāng language. The writing of this book commenced in 1993, after the writing system was officially acknowledged by the Chinese government. The authors focused on the dialect that had served as the basis for the writing system, the Qūgǔ 曲谷 village variety of the Yādū 雅都 subdialect of Northern Qiāng.

The success of a new writing system for a previously unwritten language, especially one with many highly divergent dialects, like Qiāng, largely depends on the extent to which overall speakers are familiar with the dialect that serves as

¹ For an overview of previous linguistic work on Qiang and a complete bibliography of published works, see LaPolla and Huáng (2003: 16-17).

the basis of the writing system. To be able to read and write, one should master the phonological system of the dialect in question. Moreover, the success of the system is contingent upon a sufficient number of reading materials and dictionaries written in the variety underlying the writing system. With these considerations in mind, Huáng and Zhōu's book has been conceived as a standard reference grammar of the Qūgǔ variety that serves to facilitate compilation of reading materials and reference books, to familiarize speakers of various Qiāng dialects with the dialect underlying the writing system, and to further promulgate the use thereof (p. 2). The ultimate aspiration of the authors is to promote the Qūgǔ variety to the status of common Qiāng, hence the book title. These goals aside, this book presents the reader with what is doubtless one of the most painstaking synchronic descriptions of one of a many Qiāng varieties.

The volume contains all the usual parts of a linguistic description: an introductory chapter detailing the history and the sociolinguistic background of the studied language, and separate chapters on phonology and phonetics, grammar, sentence types and lexicon, in that order. In addition, one whole chapter is devoted to Qiāng dialects, and the newly introduced writing system is illustrated by one appended text in the Qiāng orthography. The volume is concluded by seven fully annotated Qiāng texts (in the International Phonetic Alphabet) and an extensive Chinese-Qiāng glossary arranged by semantic fields.

The book took more than a decade to complete. These years were devoted to repeated verification of data, addition of new materials, and extensive discussions between the authors and their language consultants. In addition, for one author, Huáng Bùfán (responsible for the analytic chapters), this book is the culmination of half a century of research on Qiāng, which for her started in the late 1950s as part of the Chinese Academy of Sciences survey and continued throughout the years. As the product of a fruitful collaboration between one of the most meticulous Chinese linguists and fieldworkers, Huáng Bùfán, and a young native Qiāng linguist with extensive fieldwork experience, this book combines state of the art linguistic expertise with reliable command of ample data.

In many ways, the book heralds a new era in minority language description in China, as it reaches levels of sophistication and detail that are rarely found in comparable studies by other authors, due to the sheer amount and the degree of familiarity of Huáng and Zhōu with the data, amassed through fifty years of research.

The volume is based on the speech of a large number of language consultants of different genders and age groups, to which native language feel of one of the two authors is adduced. This allows the authors not only to sketch a reliable and representative outline of the described variety, but also to make interesting observations on sound variation and change (p. 55). In addition, in the spirit of the latest guidelines for linguistic fieldwork (cf. Dixon 2007: 30), the authors detail the process of gathering data: names of linguistic consultants and the exact division of work (from whom, in what settings and what data were collected, with whom they were checked and analysed, who were the story narrators, etc.) (p. 58).

Furthermore, their mastery of Qiāng allows the authors to reach a high degree of precision in analysis. For example, Huáng and Zhōu are able to distinguish

between various meanings of Qiāng homophonous derivational morphemes and particles and gloss them accordingly (thereby avoiding the unfortunate practice common in Chinese linguistic descriptions to gloss function words and particles by their Chinese near-equivalents or under the underspecified label *zhùcí* ‘particle’). They are able to reveal complex verb paradigms, obscured in Qiāng by assimilation, vowel harmony and syllable contraction. Idiosyncratic uses, such as patterns of co-occurrences of directional prefixes with verbs (p. 267), are explained at length. For example, the verb [ʔi-çi] ‘die’, contrary to what might be logically expected (‘away from the speaker’), takes the directional prefixes ‘inwards’ or ‘to the front’. Culturally specific lexical items are treated in a separate section (p. 278-281). All the phenomena discussed are abundantly illustrated with example sentences, some taken from the stories appended to the end of the volume, thus assuring coherence between analytic sections and appended data. In sum, this thorough familiarity with the researched language makes this book a reliable and valuable source of information for further studies on Qiāng dialects, Qiangic languages and the Sino-Tibetan language-family at large.

To add some criticism, since no book is perfect, I would like to point out two minor shortcomings of this work: (1) occasional speculative etymologies; and (2) lack of historical background information.

(1) One possible by-product of the authors’ high proficiency in the researched language is that the authors at times appear to be rather unrestrained in their etymologizing attempts, as, for example, in their treatment of consonant finals.

Qiāng stands out from the languages of the area for its complex phonological system. Unlike most Sino-Tibetan languages, it has a large variety of consonant finals, including also consonant clusters. The Qūgǔ variety has a total of 28 simple consonant and 11 consonant cluster finals, thus far surpassing the usual 10 consonant final inventory in most languages of the region.² The authors’ explanation of this phenomenon is that many consonant finals are due to the merging of two syllables into one as a result of reduction to schwa, devoicing and dropping of the unstressed vowel in the root of the second syllable (p. 31).³ With their good command of the researched data, the authors are naturally in an advantageous position with respect to uncovering the etymologies of such merged words. In fact, the authors even posit the restoration of original affixation and compounding patterns obscured by the effects of syllable merging as one of the explicit goals for their analysis (p. 59).

The problem is that at the present state of knowledge it is difficult, if not altogether impossible, to reliably distinguish between those cases where a consonant final is a result of the merging of two syllables into one, those where it is an inherent part of the root (even though these are held to be exceedingly few

² Most Sino-Tibetan, Kam-Tai, Hmong-Mien and Austronesian languages at some time in their histories had the following consonant finals: *-p, -t, -k; -w, -j; -l, -r; -s, -h* and a glottal stop (cf. Jacques 2004: 82).

³ This view is generally accepted in Qiāng studies, cf. Liú 1984, Huáng 1991: 250-252 or LaPolla 2003a: 573.

in number, cf. Liú 1984: 47),⁴ and those where a consonant final is a derivational or a classifying suffix. Overall, to many Qiāng speakers, numerous words with consonant finals (even when resulting from a fairly transparent merger of two words into one) are already fully lexicalized and semantically indivisible (cf. LaPolla and Huáng 2003: 34). To propose etymologies for words with consonant finals is therefore a challenging problem, to which the authors propose creative solutions. However, some of the offered etymologies are, in my opinion, unorthodox to the extent of bordering on questionable.

In the section on compounding (pp. 260-262), Huáng and Zhōu propose a set of classifying suffixes or “shape markers” (*xíngzhuàng biāoji* 形状标记). These markers are said to classify nouns by their associations with different shapes. For example, it is argued that the marker -q frequently appears on words denoting oval objects. This marker is explained as derived from the stem [qa-] of the word [qapats̚] ‘head’.⁵ The authors note that this stem is sometimes pronounced [qə], in which syllable the schwa can weaken and drop, leaving the initial [q-] free to attach to other words as a consonant final. The proposed examples include [zəq] ‘tongue’, [paq] ‘heel’ and [ɿləq] ‘tear’ (the etymology of the first syllable of these presumed contractions is not indicated). More questionable examples of this oval shape marker are [jimiaq] ‘thumb’, [dzəq] ‘dew’, [ɕyæ:q] ‘shadow’ and even [zətɕ^haq] ‘rabbit, hare’. An interesting side question is the relation of this presumably nominal marker [-q] to the final [-q] in some adjectives (p. 271), including also the word for ‘oval’, [dzɿndzəq] (but also [bumbaq] ‘numb’, [tsitstsæq] ‘sharp’ and [hatʂaq] ‘raw’), which issue is regrettably not addressed in the book.

Etymologies proposed in this section on compounding suggest many peculiar semantic categorizations in Qiāng. Rabbits are apparently perceived of by the Qiāng as oval, wounds ([ts^huejmi]) as fruit-shaped (from [-jmi] ‘fruit-like shape’) and ears ([niku]) as circular (from [-ku] ‘circular shape’). Apart from these presumably Qiāng-specific associations, Qiāng appears to share some of its semantic associations with Chinese. Take, for instance, the marker [-hǎi] ‘yellow’ (p. 262). This word can be used on its own in the meaning ‘snivel, snot’. As a suffix attached to other words, it is explained as denoting the meaning ‘yellow’. Some of the given examples are [χs̚æhǎi] ‘yellow’, [χl̥əhǎi] ‘loess’, [ts^huphǎi] ‘spittle’, as well as [qua^hhǎi] ‘face’. While the word ‘face’ can potentially be associated with yellow (skin) for the Chinese, it is an interesting and, in my opinion, far from certain question whether the same semantic extension is valid for Qiāng.

(2) Given the primarily descriptive goals of this study, a synchronic description of the Qūgǔ variety to serve as a standard reference work on Qiāng, a historical outline detailing questions of the relationship of Qiāng with other Sino-Tibetan languages is obviously beyond its scope. At the same time, given the

⁴ In her 1991 outline of Qiangic languages (1991: 252), Huáng Bùfán tentatively proposes, on the basis of a comparative study of cognate words in rGyalrong, Dào fú, Quèyù and Qiāng, nine consonant codas as common for their ancestor stage. These codas are: -p (-v), -t, -k (-χ); -m, -n, -ŋ; -r, -l and -s.

⁵ [pets̚] or [pats̚] is in turn a marker for round objects (p. 261). The proposed examples are, among others, [qapats̚] ‘head’ and [dzuqpets̚] ‘baldhead’.

importance of this language (which lent its name to a subgrouping within Sino-Tibetan: the Qiangic languages) and given the expertise of Huáng Bùfán in the field of historical linguistics, it is a pity that these issues are not taken up. Some assumptions about previous stages of the Qiāng language can nonetheless be inferred from the descriptive exposition. Let us examine one example, with a possible bearing on the Qiangic subgrouping.

Qiangic languages are known to have a large inventory of existential or location verbs (*cúnzài dòngcí* 存在动词 ‘existential verbs’ and *língyǒu dòngcí* 领有动词 ‘possession verbs’ in Huáng and Zhōu’s formulation, pp. 123-126), the use of which depends on the semantics of the referent (animate or inanimate, large or valuable) or on the nature of its location (for example, inside a container). Qiāng is no exception in this respect. The Qūgǔ variety has six possession verbs, of which one, [qæ:qe], is more general and, in the authors’ analysis (p. 128), can normally replace any of the remaining five verbs. Based on this observation, the authors suggest that [qæ:qe] is the original possession verb and that other verbs are the products of later diversification. Regrettably, the authors do not specify whether they had other grounds for this assumption than just the semantic compatibility of this verb in modern Qiāng. For example, the fact that these existential and location verbs are generally not cognate among Qiangic languages may have also played a role.

All in all, the plethora of Qiāng data and the detailed analyses in this study raise important questions, to which often no clear-cut answers exist. The book is commendable for suggesting issues of broad significance and wide implications, proposing tentative solutions and supplying detailed evidence for further analysis and comparison with other languages.

It will take time to ascertain whether the Qiāng writing system, which motivated the writing of this book, will be a success, and whether the Qūgǔ variety can be effectively promoted to the status of lingua franca among the Qiāng. Irrespective of these two issues, there is no doubt that this book will stand the proof of time as a lasting contribution to Sino-Tibetan studies. For one author, Huáng Bùfán, this volume is the culmination of her 50-year long study of Qiāng dialects. I hope that at the same time it unfolds a new chapter in her research, that of continued release, with the help of her younger colleagues, of valuable data and meticulous analyses painstakingly amassed in the past half a century of work.

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