1. Introduction. Despite a large population, despite relatively accessible settlement areas on flat land, and despite a sizable urban population, the Zhuang are not well-known even among Tai specialists and other SE Asian cognoscenti. In this paper I wish to speak about this largest and yet least understood cousin of the more familiar languages of SE Asia by discussing aspects of the development and diversity in Zhuang and proposing some rules that have led to that diversity.

The sources for this study are both old and new. An old source, but one largely unknown until now and one from which I have drawn much information is the fieldwork report Zhuangyu Yinxì (Zhuang Phonology) 1959, which contains the phonological system for fifty-six kinds of Zhuang. There is also the Zhuangyu Jianzhi(Sketch of the Zhuang language) by Wei Qingwen and Qin Guosheng. Also useful has been the extensive field report for Bouyei Buyiyu Diaocha Baogao (1958) as well as Yu Cuirong’s Buyi Jianzhi (Sketch of the Bouyei language). The Jianzhi Sketches for Zhuang and Bouyei are conveniently collected in Wang 1984. I have used Day (1966) for Tay, Vy Thi Be, Janice E. Saul, and Nancy Freiberger Wilson (1982), Nancy Freiberger and Vy Thi Be (1976) as well as Janice E. Saul, and Nancy Freiberger Wilson (1980) for Nung, and the materials in Gedney (1989, 1992a, 1992b) for Bac Va, Leiping, Yay, and Longming. The new sources are my extensive fieldnotes and instrumental recordings and analyses of the speech of Ms. Wei Feng, Zhuang linguist and head of Guangxi Province’s Rongshui County Language Committee. I have also recently obtained tape recordings of Nung Fan Slihng made by Mr. Vang Vang Vy. There are, moreover, two recent accounts of the variation in Zhuang and Bouyei respectively soon to appear in English, Zhang (1991) and Wang (1991).

The Zhuang are the largest minority group in China with a population of about fifteen million. Their home areas are located mostly in the western two-thirds of Guangxi-Zhuang Autonomous Region in South Central China. Although the majority of the Zhuang dwell in Guangxi, there are also a considerable number of Zhuang found in Yunnan Province to
the west of Guangxi along the Vietnamese border in Guangnan, Wenshan, and Qiubei Prefectures. There are also Zhuang living isolated in the far NE of Guangxi astraddle the Guangxi-Guangdong border. Beyond these larger settlements, Zhuang are found in scattered places in Hunan Province at Honghua Yao Autonomous County. Also a few Zhuang immigrated to SE Guizhou about nine generations ago and some other hardy Zhuang settlers are found in the Himalayan Highlands of Muli Tibetan Autonomous County of Sichuan Province. Outside of China there are Zhuang or close relatives of the Zhuang in northern Vietnam.

Map 1: The Zhuang, Bouyei and others
One of the close relatives of the Zhuang are the Tày, who the Vietnamese formerly called Thổ, though this designation is today regarded as pejorative; they are a 1 million strong group with a high degree of bilingualism and of acculturation. Another group are the more culturally and linguistically preservative Tày Nùng (hereafter Nùng) with a population of 700,000. The Tày and the Nùng are found on the left bank of the Red River principally in Cao Bằng, Lạng Sơn, and Hà Giang Provinces across the extreme northeast of Vietnam extending up to the Sino-Vietnamese border. According to Vietnamese sources, the Nùng claim that they are descended of immigrants who left Guangxi or Guangdong some centuries ago, whereas the Tày are thought to have been in Vietnam much earlier. The Giày/Yay (also known as Nhâng, Dàng, Pu Nà) as well as the Bố-Y (or Chùng Chá) of Vietnam are relatively recent arrivals from Guizhou Province. They once were a part of the 2.5 million strong Bouyei, whose language is very closely related to Northern Zhuang.

The Zhuang people do not have a unified way of referring to themselves or to their language and this circumstance has certainly contributed to the confusion about who the Zhuang (Mandarin [tsu̯¹ŋ], formerly spelled Chuant) are. Indeed, autonyms used by the Zhuang exceed twenty in number and include: pou₄tsun⁶/pou₄cun⁶ (Central and Western Guangxi); pu⁴jat⁴=Bouyei (Western Guangxi and Yunnan); pu⁴noŋ² (Yunnan Wenshan); bu⁴dai² (Yunnan Wenshan, Malipo, Kaiyuan); pho⁴that³ (Guangxi Longzhou); kwu²tho³ or pu⁴to³ (Zuojiang); pou⁴man² (Guangxi Hechi); pou⁴bam³ (‘village people’ Guangxi Wuming); and pou⁴lau³ (Guangxi Fengshan). Beyond these names, the Zhongguo Da Baike Quanshu (1986:585) reports the Zhuang in various places also call themselves: Bushuang, Butu (Gentu), Buyang, Buyue, Buna, Nong’an, Bubian, Tulao, Gaolan, Buman, Buming, Bulong, and Budong. The situation has been made more complex still by governmental decisions to group several non-Zhuang peoples, such as the E and Laji (Lachi), with the Zhuang, cf. Edmondson (1991, 1992) and Liang (1990).

The Chinese have generally regarded the Zhuang as being a single ethnic group. The earliest name of the Zhuang (Western Han) is Wuhu 袁胡. Records of the Eastern Han period (AD 40) refer to the Zhuang as Li with the character 狸. During the
period of the Three Kingdoms they were known as the Lao or Liao 當 and in the Jin Dynasty they were called the Lang 僺. Finally, in Song times there developed a tradition of referring to them as “Zhuang” and employing for this name the character 僟. This designation was particularly used for the Zhuang of the northern half of Guangxi. In 1965 the Chinese character 僧 was replaced with 僣.

In contrast to the Chinese, Western scholars have rarely employed the name Zhuang to designate these people. The most common appellation for the Zhuang has been “Tai” with an additional qualification involving the place names along the lines, “the Tai dialect at Wuming”, cf. Dodd (1923), even though the name “Tai” is not used (except at a very few places) by the Zhuang to refer to themselves. Indeed, Dodd claims that Tai, Dai, or Thai are usual names for the “literate” Tai, such as the Tai Lü of Xishuang Banna (Sipsong Banna) or the Tai Nüa of Dehong Prefecture in Yunnan Province and those of SE Asia, whereas the “non-literate” Tai of Yunnan, Sichuan, Guangxi, and Guizhou employ a name resembling Jai (Yay) or Lao.

2. The major divisions of Tai. As is well-known, Zhuang is a part of the Tai Stock of languages. Li Fang Kuei (1960, 1977) divided this Stock into three subbranches: Northern, Central, and Southwestern. Haudricourt and Gedney tend to favor a two term system opposing Li’s Central and SW (Tai “proper”) to Northern Tai. The Southwestern group consists of several relatively well-studied languages such as Thai and Lao as well as Shan, Black and White Tai, and other groups in Vietnam, Myanmar, Laos, and China. The Central Division includes the Southern Zhuang as spoken at Longzhou, the Nùng, and the Tay (Vietnam). In the Northern Tai Branch one finds, aside from Northern Zhuang, E (a newly discovered group of 30,000 in Rongshui County, Guangxi Province, cf. Edmondson 1992), the Bouyei (population 2.5 million), the Yay and Bouyei of northern Vietnam situated between the Western Nùng and Tay, the Po-ai of Yunnan Province, the Saek near Nakhon Panom, Thailand and in Laos just across the Mekhong as well as the Tay Mène and the Tai Yo of Khamouan Province, Laos (Chamberlain 1991). Thus, in some sense the Zhuang speak at least two languages, one belonging to Northern Tai and the other to Central Tai.

Since the Zhuang are so numerous, Zhuang language data