

Linguistic and Historical Explanation of the Names for the Buyi, a Group of Tai People in Southwest China

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An ethnic name is one of the important ways an ethnic group, or one of its subgroups, differs from other ethnic groups or subgroups. Its creation and development is in step with the history of the ethnic group to which it refers. The meaning of the names of each group vary because of the differences in social development background and cultural environments. This paper gives a tentative explanation of the names of the Buyis, especially those which appeared in the Han Chinese historical books, such as, “Yue (越)”, “Pu (濮)”, “Lao (僚)”, “Yi (夷)” and “Zhong (仲)”.

I. Buyi and Its Names

Buyi is a minority group in southern China, mainly distributed in the south, the southwest and the central part of Guizhou province of the country. Additionally, there are a small number of them living scattered in some parts of Sichuan and Yunnan provinces, and the mountain areas of Northern Vietnam. According to the statistical figures given in 1990, the Buyis have a population of more than 2,540,000, and more than 95% are living in Guizhou province of China. Genealogically, the Buyis are one of the many Tai groups in south China and Southeast Asia. Its language belongs to the north branch of the Tai language group in the Tai-Kadai language family. Linguists from China are used to calling it the Zhuangdai

branch of the Zhuangdong language group in the Sino-Tibetan language family. It is very close to the northern dialect of Zhuang, which is nearby. It also has a close relationship with such groups as Zhuang, Dong(Kam), Shui, and Maonan in both geographical location and historical origin.

“Buyi”, has been the registered name of the group since 1953. It is the transliteration of “pu⁴ ?jai⁴”, which is a name the Buyis call themselves. Because of the difference of local accent, “pu⁴ ?jai⁴” has several variants, as shown below:

1, pu ⁴ ?jai ⁴	2, pu ⁴ dzai ⁴
3, pu ⁴ dzo ⁴ i ⁴	4, pəu ⁴ ?oi ⁴
5, pu ⁴ jai ³	6, pu ⁴ ?ji ⁴
7, pu ⁴ ?jui ⁴	8, pu ⁴ dži ⁴
9, pu ⁴ ?ie ⁴	

All these names are very close to the registered name “Buyi” phonetically. Moreover, the Buyis in Northern Vietnam also have similar names such as “Buyi”, “Yay” and “Gaiy”, all of which are the names the Buyis in Vietnam call themselves.

“pu⁴ ?jai⁴” is a noun, which consists of a prefix “pu⁴” and the main part “?jai⁴”. In this construction, “pu⁴” means “people, person”, while “?jai⁴” together with its variants have no specific meaning in Buyi language at all. In Wangmo (southwest of Guizhou), the word “?jai⁴” appears in a four-syllable word “?jai⁴ kun¹ ?jai⁴ tan³” which means “skimp and save, live frugally”. But we do not have sufficient evidence to prove the internal relationship between these two.

Besides “pu⁴ ?jai⁴” and its variants, there are still some other names given to the Buyis. In the ancient Han Chinese historical books, the Buyis were once mentioned as “Yue”, “Luoyue”, “Xi’ou”, “Pu”, “Yi”, “Lao”, “Yipu”, “Yilso”. Since the Yuan Dynasty (13th century), especially in the local chronicles of Ming, Qing Dynasties and the Republic of China (from 14th century to 1949), such names

as “Zhongjia”, “Zhongmiao”, “Zhongjiamiao”, “Qingzhong”, “Shuijia”, “Shuihu”, “Shuizu”, “Yizu”, “Yijia”, “Yibian”, “Bendi” (the native), “Tujia”, “Tubian”, and “Sharen” were used to refer to the Buyis. Some of these names show the origin of the Buyis as an ethnic group, others are related to habits of living and model of production of Buyi people. For example, the Buyis like to live at the bottom of the mountains, beside a stream or river, and have been engaged in agriculture, mainly planting paddy rice since the ancient times. So they got the names: “Shuizu”, “Shuijia”, and “Shuihu”, all of which have something to do with water or paddy rice planting. Moreover, the Buyis are regarded as the native people of Guizhou, excluding the Buyis who immigrated to Yunan, Sichuan and Northern Vietnam a few hundred years ago. So the Han Chinese called them “Bendi”, “Tujia” and “Tubian”, all mean “natives”.

The Buyi, have special names for those living in different areas, having different accents and different dressing styles. For example, in the areas around Xingbei Town of Zhenfeng in southwestern Guizhou province, those who live near the city of Zhenfeng and southwards to Ceheng county are called “ $pu^4 ?ja: \eta^{1,}$ ”. Those who live in the upper reach of the North Basin River are called “ $pu^4 na^6,$ ” and another name “ $pu^4 no \eta^{2,}$ ” is given to those living on the north bank of the North Basin River. Over the area of Luodian and Wangmo, people living near the towns are called “ $pu^4 cu^{1,}$ ”, while those who live in the rural mountain areas are called “ $pu^4 luo^6,$ ”. Moreover, there are still some other names such as “ $pu^4 ?ba: n^4,$ ”, “ $pu^4 ja: u^4,$ ”, “ $pu^4 zu \eta^{2,}$ ”, and “ $pu^4 t\zeta am^5,$ ” given to those dressing themselves differently and speaking with a different accent. As for the Buyis, no matter what names they are given, they still regard “ $pu^4 ?jai^4,$ ” as their ethnic name.

II. Linguistic and Historical Explanation

of the Names for the Buyis

With regard to the origin of the Buyis, there are several historical theories. But all these will not be addressed in this paper. Here, we will analyze only the relationship between the modern name the Buyis call themselves and such names as “Yue”, “Pu”, “Lao”, “Yi” and “Zhong” which appeared in the ancient Han Chinese historical books, or were widely used among the folks last few centuries.

1) “?jai⁴” and “Yue”

“Yue” was the general name for a number of loosely related ethnic groups which inhabited broad areas of south China long time ago. These groups lived on the southeast coast of China in approximately 2000 B.C, more than 4000 years ago. The era beginning in the “Spring and Autumn Period” to the final days of the “Warring States Ages” was the heyday of development for some of the groups. Two local countries, “Wu” and “Yue”, were founded and once tried to seize control of the empire on the Central Plains of China. Due to their numerous branches, the “Yue” were once referred to as “Baiyue” (hundred Yue) in the ancient Han Chinese historical books. In the areas where the Buyi people live today, there once lived two branches of the “Yue” named “Luoyue” and “Xi’ou”. Modern Buyi people are said to have descended from these two groups. The Buyis originated from the ancient Yue, assimilated cultures from other groups, then gradually developed and have formed the Buyis of today. This viewpoint is widely accepted by historical scholars.

“Yue”, the name of ancient Yue peoples, is similar to “?jai⁴”, the present-day phonetic name of the Buyis. These two syllables seem to be pronounced the same; however, there are some important differences. According to the studies of the