The Kam orthography

LONG Yaohong (龙耀宏)
Guizhou Institute of Nationalities

1. Kam population and language use

The Kam (侗 , Dòng) nationality is the eleventh largest of the fifty-five minorities in China. Kam people live mainly in twenty counties around the area where Guìzhōu (贵州), Húnán (湖南) and Guǎngxī (广西) provinces meet. A relatively small number live scattered in the Èxī Tǔjiā Miáo (鄂西土家苗) Special Administrative Region of Húběi 湖北 Province.

According to statistics from the fourth national census in 1990, the Kam population is 2,514,014; of whom 1,089,691, or 43%, live in eight counties of Qiándōngnán (黔东南), Guìzhōu: Lípíng (黎平), Tiānzhù (天柱), Cóngjiāng (从江), Róngjiāng (榕江), Jǐnpíng (锦屏), Sānsuì (三穗), Jiànhé (剑河) and Zhènyuǎn (镇远).

Since the Kam people generally live close together, the Kam language has remained for most of them the main means of communication. There are about 800,000 Kam people who no longer speak Kam, and use Chinese instead. They live mainly in Húběi, in the Guìzhōu Tóngrén (铜仁) district, and in Húnán Zhǐjiāng (芷江). The other 1,700,000 Kam people—about 68% of the total population—still speak Kam as their first language. Of these, about one million do not speak any Chinese.

There are many different nationalities living together in the Kam areas. According to the 1990 statistics, some 2,447,000 Miáo (苗), Hàn (汉) Chinese, Bùyī (布依), Shuǐ (水), Yáo (瑶) and Zhuàng (壮) people live in Guìzhōu's Qiándōngnán. In everyday life, each nationality uses its own language, and when the nationalities mix, Chinese becomes the main communication tool. In the counties where the Kam people are most concentrated, it is common for one nationality to speak another's language. I estimate that about 200,000 Hàn people throughout China are proficient in Kam, as well as about 150,000 Miáo people, 50,000 Shuǐ people, 20,000 Yáo people and 10,000 Zhuàng people. Some Kam people are also fluent in Miáo, Yáo and Shuǐ.

2, Kam-language survey and the birth of a Kam orthography

Before 1958, the Kam nationality had no orthography for its language. Some educated Kam used Chinese characters to record the sounds of Kam words. This method of recording Kam is still used in some remote areas.

In 1956, the Chinese Government, in considering the development needs of minority peoples, decided to help those minorities without orthographies to create their own. On 20th March, the State Department published the "Notice concerning the authorisation and division of labour for experimental implementation of new and reformed orthographies for all minority nationality languages." This in turn unleashed a countrywide movement to develop orthographies for minority nationalities.

In December 1956, the Kam Language section of the Chinese Academy of Science's First Minority Language Survey Group set off to begin work. It consisted of twenty-eight people, drawn from the Chinese Academy of Science's Minority Language Research Institute, the Central Institute of Nationalities (in Běijīng, 北京), the Central Southern Institute of Nationalities (in Wǔhàn, 武汉), and the Guìzhōu Institute of Nationalities (in Guìyáng, 贵阳). The members of the Working Group split into three groups, going in separate directions. Between them, they visited nineteen places in fourteen counties in Guìzhōu, Húnán, and Guǎngxī provinces, and carried out intensive language survey. At each place, pronunciation was recorded. In all, this amounted to more than 130,000 words and phrases, more than 8,000 sentences as examples for grammatical analysis, and twenty-five long stories.

In April 1957, the Survey Group, having sorted out and compared the survey data, divided the language into two dialects, southern and northern, with each dialect further subdivided into three sub-dialects. The experts reckoned that as the population using the southern dialect was greater, it was reasonable to choose the southern dialect to be used as foundational in the development of an orthography. The speech of Zhānglǔ (章鲁) village in Róngjiāng was taken as standard. It was from the first sub-dialect of the southern dialect, but had pronunciation and vocabulary similar to the second sub-dialect of the southern dialect. It had nine tones, like the first sub-dialect of the northern dialect. Taking Zhānglǔ speech as standard in creating an orthography was intended to maximise the ease with which both southern and northern Kam people could learn to read and write.

In August 1958, Kam nationality representatives from Guìzhōu, Húnán and Guǎngxī, together with experts who had designed the orthography, convened a meeting in Guìyáng to discuss and agree on "A scheme for a draft Kam orthography." At the time, the scheme took into consideration the idea of facilitating the study of Chinese pinyin for the Kam people. So Kam was entirely written in Roman script. Sounds in Kam which were the same (or nearly the same) as sounds in

From 1981 to 1995, the orthography was taught in 608 classes in 135 primary schools. These classes involved 20,892 pupils.

Vocational school teaching of Kam has taken place in two kinds of school. One kind has been Qiándōngnán's special Nationality Cadre schools. Such schools set up nationality language classes in 1984, and between 1984 and 1995, trained 237 Kam students in the orthography. The second kind has been the various county Nationality Teachers' schools in Guìzhōu. From 1986 to 1995, 627 trainee-teachers studied Kam. Most of these became Kam teachers in the primary schools.

The main institutes of higher education where Kam is taught are the Central University of Nationalities in Běijīng (formerly the Central Institute of Nationalities) and the Guìzhōu Institute of Nationalities in Guìyáng. The Central University of Nationalities began having Kam language majors as early as 1953. Then there were fourteen students. The next intake was in 1963, when there were five students. In 1967, there was a class of fourteen students; and in 1985, eleven students. In 1985, the Guìzhōu Institute of Nationalities established a Kam language and literature major in the Nationality Language Department. Since then thirteen classes of Kam students have been recruited from Guìzhōu and Húnán provinces, altogether 157 students. The Nationality Language Department of Guìzhōu Institute of Nationalities has set up an Office dedicated to the work of teaching and research of the Kam language. It is the first Centre for Kam language teaching and research in China.

Kam publications can be divided into two types: teaching materials and other reading materials.

To add to the reading primer and dictionaries mentioned above, a *Kam Language Textbook (volumes 1 and 2)* for use in literacy classes was published in 1981. In addition, between 1986 and 1989, a *Primary School Kam Language Textbook (volumes 1 to 7)* was published in Guìzhōu, Húnán and Guǎngxī, with slightly different versions of Kam text in each province; as many as 200,000 copies were printed. The Guìzhōu Institute of Nationalities has also compiled several teaching texts and distributed these internally, including *Kam Language and Literature*, *Kam Grammar*, and *Kam Dialects*.

From 1959 to 1997, twenty-five other books were published using the Kam orthography, printing altogether 58,750 copies. There were four manuals, twelve literature and art books, three science and technology books, and six social science books. Apart from these, about thirty other books were compiled and printed, though not formally published, by the different provincial and county authorities.