

**Notes on the 5th Yi-Burmese Conference
and subsequent peregrinations**

James A. Matisoff
University of California
Berkeley

This International Conference on "Yi-Burmese" (= Lolo-Burmese) was an important event, both from the academic and the intercultural point of view. It was the fifth — and by far the largest-scale — conference devoted to this key branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family, and the first to be held in China.¹ It took place in the city of Xichang in SW Sichuan, capital of the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Region, in a hotel on the outskirts of the city by the shore of a scenic lake, Qionghai.

Participants included foreigners from the U.S., Japan, and Scandinavia, as well as 50 or more citizens of the PRC, including many non-Han linguists. The number of active foreign participants was considerably less than what was indicated on the precirculated List of Participants, which had included ten Americans. In fact only three Americans (Jerold Edmondson, James Matisoff, and Grace Wiersma) presented papers, along with three Scandinavians (Inga-Lill Hansson, Harald Bockman, and Tollef Ås), and four Japanese.

The only official language of the conference was Chinese. All the Americans and Europeans who actually presented talks did so in Chinese, speaking from notes. The four Japanese in attendance all presented papers, though two of them (BABA Kimichika and MARUYAMA Koichi) are specialists in fields far distant from Yi-Burmese (comparative religion and history, respectively). These two, as well as the Burmish specialist YABU Shiro, gave their talks in Japanese, which were skillfully interpreted paragraph by paragraph by a Chinese who had studied in Japan. The senior Japanese Tibeto-Burmanist, NISHIDA Tatsuo, gave his talk in Chinese, from a written text.

On the Chinese side, papers were presented by many of the leading specialists in the minority languages of China from the older generation.

¹ The First Loloish Conference was held at U.C. Berkeley on Feb. 21, 1984 (organized by J. Matisoff). The Second and Third Conferences were held at the University of Lund, Sweden (both organized by I.-L. Hansson), on Nov. 11-13, 1986 and Oct. 5, 1988, respectively. The Fourth was held at the University of Texas, Arlington (organized by J. Edmondson) on Oct. 3, 1990.

including CHEN Kang, DAI Qingxia,² GAI Xingzhi, HUANG Bufan, JIANG Zhuyi, LI Yongsui, LUO Meizhen, SUN Hongkai, WANG Danlan. In addition, impressive contributions were made by a number of young graduate students in their late twenties, both Han (e.g. Fu Allan) and minority (e.g. Su Lianke, Lama Ziwo (a.k.a. Qiu Fuyuan), Qumu Tiexi). Conspicuously sparse were scholars in their 30's or 40's, the generation of scholarship lost to the Cultural Revolution.

One of the most appealing aspects of this Conference was the large number of presentations by native speakers of the languages under discussion, including Yi, Bai, Naxi, Jingpho, Lisu, and Hani.

The quality of the papers presented was rather uneven, though this is equally true of most conferences held in the U.S. In general, one feels that the younger generation of scholars coming up would profit enormously from a couple of years' training in the theory and practice of comparative/historical linguistics. Several of these promising young linguists have expressed keen interest in studying abroad, though the current economic situation is making this difficult.

At the end of the Conference, a solemn self-criticism session was held, with the foreigners seated at one side of the room and the organizers on the other. We had few complaints. Our hosts had gone to a great deal of trouble to make as us comfortable as possible. We were well and abundantly fed, plied with potent Yi liquor on all conceivable occasions, and entertained by a variety of special events and excursions, most notably a wild torchlit parade followed by a mass Yi dance in a stadium, the night of *Huobaqte*, the Torch Festival (August 3). As a sort of unofficial spokesman for the foreign contingent, I was called upon to make frequent speeches of thanks, public toasts, etc., which was daunting at first but got somewhat easier as I painfully built up my stock of genial clichés.

The physical setting for the meetings was most attractive. Young women in full Yi costume were stationed at the doors of the living quarters, dining room, and meeting halls, bowing the participants gracefully through. The meetings received intensive coverage from the local media in Xichang, including a TV special and writeups in the newspapers, both Yi and Chinese. The one phrase of Yi that we foreigners quickly learned was *k'a sha sha* "Thank you!"

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² Professor Dai was the Chair of the Organizing Committee of the Conference.

I had my heart set on visiting the Lahu-Tai-Lawa Autonomous County in Yunnan after the Conference, since I had been working on the Lahu language of Thailand since 1965, and had been unable to get permission to visit the Lahu-speaking area of Yunnan during my previous trips to China in 1983 and 1984. After many vicissitudes, it turned out to be possible this time.

From Xichang, I took the train to Kunming, whence I managed to get a plane ticket to Jinghong in Xishuangbanna.³ From there I ended up taking a public bus to Menghai, where I hired a jeep to take me to the Lahu area near Lancang City. I spent a day and a night there, though I was not permitted to take a meal or spend the night in the Lahu village I visited, but was required to return to the administrative center in Lancang City before nightfall. It was a wonderful experience to be in an area where the Lahu are the majority group, where they live in town as well as in villages, where some of them are in a position of local authority. The village I was taken to was electrified. Lahu is the medium of instruction for the first two years of schooling, which is better than nothing but nowhere near enough for children to achieve real command of the written language. I met several local schoolteachers. They gave me some textbooks, including a version of the Lahu creation myths I had never seen before. In the village I recorded over an hour of conversations, stories, and music. I read them a collection of Lahu proverbs from Thailand, most of which they knew and appreciated. I got a version of a Trickster story that was very similar to one I had recorded in Thailand in 1966. I asked them about their customs and festivals, and anything else I could think of in the very limited time available. The dialect of Black Lahu spoken in this village and in Lancang City was virtually identical to the one I have studied in Thailand, except of course for the higher proportion of loanwords from Chinese. We had no problem communicating with each other. As can be imagined, a deep rapport was established right away. The only other Westerners they had ever seen were members of a UNESCO team sent to Yunnan after the disastrous earthquake of 1989. On my last morning, in a drizzling rain, I was marched through the market in Lancang by a Lahu woman schoolteacher, who kept pointing to the various objects for sale (eels, snails, chestnuts, eggplants, winnowing trays, brooms, etc.) and asking me how to say their names in Lahu. When I did so, the people selling the things would break into enormous grins and offer me free samples, thrusting fistfuls of peanuts, etc. at me. I was really touched, despite feeling a little like a trained elephant with all those peanuts.

It was then necessary to rapidly retrace my steps: jeep to Menghai, bus to Jinghong, bus to Simao (this time no plane was available from Jinghong).

³ Please see map p. 185.

plane to Kunming, plane to Beijing, plane back to San Francisco), arriving home on August 15, 1991.

When in Lancang, I was earnestly invited to return for the gala celebration of the fortieth anniversary of the establishment of the Lahu Autonomous County, to be held in April 1993. I very much want to do so, for as long a stay as possible.

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The trend in China seems to be in favor of more and more specialized conferences on particular minority languages and language groups. A conference on the Hanl (Akha) subbranch of Yi was scheduled to take place in August, 1992, organized by Li Yongsui, but this has now been postponed until February 1993.