

## **PUZZLING OVER PHULA: Toward the Synthesis and Statement of a Sub-branch<sup>1</sup>**

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The ethnonym ‘Phula’ has long been used to refer to the speakers of a series of Ngwi (Loloish) languages in SE Yunnan Province, China, and North Vietnam. Until recently, however, very little had been done to describe, document, and compare these varieties. In recent years Wang (2004), Pelkey (2004), Edmondson (2003), HHYC (2002), Fried (2000), Edmondson and Ziwo (1999), and Wu (1996) have offered preliminary descriptions of several Phula varieties, but the greater contextual panorama to which these lects belong has remained puzzling and undefined. In addition, much about Phula interrelationships, distribution, population, history, and genetic affiliation has remained fragmented and unclear. In response, this article seeks to present a summarized but holistic overview of the reported Phula varieties. Drawing on personal field research and insights gleaned from Chinese and English sources, the article presents a history of Phula languages and linguistics, sifts through the current complexities of Phula classification, and reports on a newly described Phula language, Phowa. The article also furthers the work of situating Phula genetically within the Ngwi branch, offering evidence in support of Bradley’s (2002) proposal that Phula be assigned to a fourth sub-branch of Ngwi. While only a summary introduction to (as opposed to a conclusive definition of) what remains a largely unresearched array of language varieties, this article can be a substantial foundation for future definitions and research on the languages called Phula.

**Keywords:** Tibeto-Burman, Yi, Phula, Yunnan, endangered languages

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

For hundreds of years, local residents and historians on both sides of the Sino-Vietnam border have used the ethnonym ‘Phula’ in reference to a series of ethnic groups with ostensible, but largely unexamined, socio-historical and linguistic affiliation. Recent years have seen a minor surge of interest in a handful of these varieties—each thought to belong to the Ngwi (Loloish)<sup>2</sup> branch of SE Tibeto-Burman (Bradley 1997:43, 2002:106); nevertheless, Phula languages on the whole have gone overlooked and undefined in Tibeto-Burman linguistics—a situation this article seeks to examine and counteract.

In Vietnam the ethnonym ‘Phula’ now denotes an official nationality; yet in China—home to over 95% of the Phula population—ethnic groups referred to as ‘Phula’ are subsumed under the Yi nationality. Nevertheless, across three prefectures of southeast Yunnan Province, the Phula title consistently surfaces as an ethnolinguistic distinction in local exonyms, vernacular autonyms, and regional ethnohistorical records alike. Phula speakers, furthermore, validate their affiliation with other reported Phula varieties. Although these groups have received increasing attention in recent years (Pelkey 2004, 2005; Pelkey, Wang & Johnson 2005; Wang 2003, 2004; Edmondson 2003; HHYC 2002; Fried 2000; Edmondson and Ziwo 1999; Wu 1996a-b, 1997), both Chinese and English sources have been fairly fragmentary in their respective approaches to Phula. English sources have focused almost exclusively on the Phula varieties of Vietnam, and most Chinese sources introducing new Phula dialects in Yunnan have described such varieties as relative isolates. Facts and figures on Phula often conflict from source to source; categories and nomenclature are frequently confused as well. As a result, in spite of

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<sup>2</sup> Ngwi is now recommended by Bradley (2004) as a diachronically favored replacement for ‘Loloish’ (‘Lolo’ being a derogatory title in China) and alternate titles such as ‘Yi group’, ‘Ni’, and ‘Yipho.’

a slowly growing notoriety, Phula has remained virtually undefined as an ethnolinguistic entity. In response, this article seeks to present a summarized, yet holistic, panorama of the ‘puzzling’ Phula situation in SW China and N Vietnam. This will be done by examining the history of Phula languages and linguistics, by sorting through the current complexities of Phula classification, and by reporting on a newly described Phula language, *Phowa*. In the process, the article endeavors to synthesize recent scholarship on Phula varieties, begin defining Phula as an ethnolinguistic entity, work toward situating Phula genetically within the Ngwi branch, and propose appropriate pathways for approaching the Phula varieties in future research and analysis.

The remaining unresearched Yi languages are both manifold in numbers and ramified in subdivisions. Bradley and Bradley (2002:95) predict that 50 more languages wait to be identified from among the Yi Nationality in Yunnan alone. Gerner (2002:11) predicts that the total count of (mutually unintelligible) Yi languages will eventually stand between 100 and 150. Clearly, much work remains to be done simply in order to document these languages. Multiple fresh Yi languages await identification from within the Phula group alone; yet, as has been illustrated best by Heijdra (1998), trying to untangle the status of even one of the hidden Yi varieties can be a tedious task. Many riddles must first be unraveled.

## **2. PHULA HISTORY**

With the exception of Abo (WSXZ 1999:184), none of the Phula languages are known to have had a written form prior to 1987. Because of this, an overview of Phula history must be gained through a combination of oral tradition and Chinese historical records.

## **2.1 Patterns of Migration**

Facts gleaned from various Chinese historians indicate that most Phula emigrated from present-day Dali and Lijiang Prefectures in three major waves during the Nanzhao and Dali Kingdom periods—between 718-1253 AD (HHYC 2002:43-83, WSZZ 2000:388-91, WSXZ 1999:184). Accordingly, today, there are three principal Phula population centers—each roughly corresponding with a major historical migration terminus (See Map: Figure 1). One major wave of migration departed from the Diancang Mountains (点苍山) of Dali and followed the Honghe River into present-day Yuxi and Honghe Prefectures where the Phula still live today along the banks of the Honghe River. Owing to this wave of migration, the middle waters of the Honghe River came to be called 濮水 (Pú Shuǐ) or ‘Phu River’ historically (HHYC 2002, WSZZ 2000). A second wave of Phula migrated to the shores of Dianchi Lake before finally moving further south to settle in the broad basin of what is now northwestern Mengzi and southeastern Kaiyuan Counties. Later, during the Yuan and Ming Dynasties (1271-1644 AD), however, this population pocket dispersed into the mountains of these and several surrounding counties (HHYC 2002:83). A third Phula population center was established in the western parts of present-day Wenshan Prefecture. Most of the Phula in this pocket are reported to have arrived before the end of the Tang Dynasty in 907 AD (WSXZ 1999:184).

Later, during the 15th and 18th centuries, according to Edmondson (2003), some Phula also migrated into Vietnam in order to escape political turmoil and/or other difficulties.

## **2.2 Current Distribution**

Today the Phula population is distributed through 19 counties of southeastern Yunnan Province, China and crosses the border into four provinces of N Vietnam, (Figure 1). The mountainous expanse of terrain which the Phula inhabit spans some 350km from east to