

**REPORT ON THE 38th ICSTLL:
Xiamen University, October 28-31, 2005**

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1. OVERVIEW

As October 2005 drew to a close, Xiamen University of Fujian, China opened its doors and stepped forward as a thoroughly gracious and thoughtful host of the 38th International Conference on Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics. Professors Li Rulong, Sun Hongkai, and Dai Qingxia chaired the conference, and over 160 participants from more than 60 universities and research institutes around the world attended the event. The conference participants hailed from a dozen or more countries, including China, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Japan, Korea, Australia, Sweden, France, Canada, and the USA. They presented data, analysis, and comparisons on nearly 100 distinct languages and dialects spoken in the Sino-Tibetan macro-region.

2. SCHEDULE

The first plenary session was held on the morning of the 28th and featured welcoming speeches by the university president Li Jianfa and each of the three conference chairmen. Following these opening ceremonies, the conference patriarch, James A. Matisoff, in trademark fashion, presented a pleasing linguistic meditation entitled, “Areal and universal issues in plant and animal nomenclature”. Further plenary papers were then presented by Chen Zhongmin, Wang Hongjun, and Li Rulong.

Beginning in the afternoon of the 28th and continuing through the morning of the 30th, papers were presented in four parallel sessions scheduled into morning and afternoon time slots. Papers

were presented in English and/or Chinese with Chinese serving as the language of choice for the majority of the papers and presentations. Although this latter fact proved challenging to many of the conference participants with limited background in Chinese, a number of Chinese presenters thoughtfully provided bilingual handouts, presentations, and/or abstracts. Likewise, some English language papers also provided Chinese versions of their presentations. Achieving a successful rendezvous with a presentation-of-interest in the shuffle of four parallel sessions also proved to be somewhat challenging at times, but this difficulty was more than compensated for by Xiamen University's state-of-the-art conference facilities.

The organizing committee ensured that the stimulating academic atmosphere was augmented by daily local-flavor feasts and time for area excursions—including a formal Chinese seafood banquet hosted by the university president on the evening of the 28th and a local sightseeing trip on the afternoon and evening of the 30th.

The conference came to a close on the morning of the 31st with a final plenary session in which papers were presented by Bao Zhiming, Luo Meizhen, Deng Xiaohua, and Jiang Di. Following these papers the remaining delegates participated in a large group debriefing discussion of the conference outcomes and expressed their gratitude to Xiamen University and the organizing committee of the conference.

3. PAPERS

In preparation for the conference, the organizing committee arranged 184 abstracts into a bound conference handbook; approximately 75% of these abstracts materialized as papers presented to the conference.

Roughly half of the papers presented during the conference were focused on Chinese languages and linguistics. Beyond this, around 30% of the papers were written on Tibeto-Burman languages, and another 10% of the papers were focused on Tai-Kadai. Most of the remaining papers were concerned with upper-level Sino-Tibetan issues, Hmong-Mien languages, general

linguistic theory, and perceived correspondences between Chinese and Tai-Kadai.

Of the papers presented on Chinese languages and linguistics, half were written on dialects of Chinese other than Mandarin, and the Chinese dialect in the spotlight was none other than Minnanhua—a variety of Chinese local to Xiamen also spoken elsewhere in Southern Fujian, Taiwan, and other adjacent areas.

In the Tibeto-Burman realm, Tibetan languages and other Bodic varieties garnered the most papers followed by a number of Ngwi languages (including papers on Akha, Azha, Jino, Lahu, and Nosu). A number of Qiangic varieties also received significant attention, as did Bai and Jingpho. Other TB languages that received treatments include Bangladesh Mru, Tujia, and Lai.

Overall the papers presented at the 38th ICSTLL tended to favor analyses and comparisons from synchronic perspectives, with only 30% or so incorporating a diachronic component. Most papers were written on syntactic and/or phonological topics in roughly equal numbers. Other significant paper themes included historical reconstruction, morphology, grammaticalization, dialectology, and language contact.

A number of key papers were presented that had important implications for future Tibeto-Burman research in general. I will only list three here. Sun Hongkai's paper on Proto-Sino-Tibetan consonant finals should be of particular benefit to Sino-Tibetan and Tibeto-Burman reconstruction. Jiang Huo's presentation of a digital Sino-Tibetan lexical database tool currently being developed by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences shows great promise for lexical and phonological comparison of TB varieties in the years to come. Of particular interest to Southeast Asian languages in general, a group of Chulalongkorn University (Bangkok, Thailand) researchers led by Theraphan L. Thongkum presented findings from research in which they used acoustic analysis to demonstrate a correspondence between tonal (fundamental frequency) variation and vowel length—findings that have broader implications for tonogenesis.

Two papers (both of which I missed due to attending other sessions) that reportedly received especially lively discussion from

the floor were Jeon Kwang Jin's proposal to use a Hangŭl (Korean) based writing system for the Lhoba language and Fan Junjun's rousing call to action regarding endangered languages spoken in China.

4. UPCOMING SINO-TIBETAN CONFERENCES

During the evening seafood banquet mentioned above, Zev Handel announced that the 39th ICSTLL will be hosted by the University of Washington in Seattle, USA, September 14-17, 2006. Handel's news was followed by a second announcement that the 40th ICSTLL is to be hosted by Heilongjiang University of Harbin, China, in 2007.

5. CONCLUSION

The 38th ICSTLL proved to be a fruitful time of interaction, with new ideas and new features of languages coming to light in the Sino-Tibetan macro-region. As Dai Qingxia noted in a closing address, interest in Sino-Tibetan linguistics does not seem to be waning.

May one more hearty round of applause go to the 38th ICSTLL organizing committee for their expenditure of time, imagination, and resources along with their attention to detail, taste, and functionality.