

The Language Corridor

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1. Introduction

Close study of the population distribution and dialect geography of some of the small languages in South China and northernmost Vietnam reveals an unmistakable but subtle pattern. This pattern indicates that there was a language corridor as reflected in a string of settlements of groups such as the Gelao, Bouyei, Pa-hng, Bolyu, Bagan, Kam, Sui, and possibly Yi (formerly called Lolo) along a line running from the western part of Guizhou Province across Guangxi Province along the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau following then the course of the Sông Lô River into Hà Giang and Lào Cai Provinces in Vietnam. In many cases the main communities of these peoples are otherwise organized and the migratory pattern can be seen only by looking at small isolated remnant groups. For that reason and others it is not surprising that the language corridor phenomenon has not been noticed before. In this paper we will try to support the idea that the line-like locus of small groups is suggestive of an exodus route of peoples leaving the turmoil of conflicts in Guizhou, Yunnan, Guangxi, and Hunan, perhaps most recently in the period of the Taiping Rebellion to the more tranquil territory of Vietnam. It is quite likely that this escape route figured into previous migratory patterns of peoples into SE Asia as well. In plotting this track we will examine several the language groups and show by means of settlement and language variation how their current locations can best be understood as the result of their ancestors opting for an escape route to a better place. In some cases we will be using data from newly discovered languages or language data and information that were heretofore unavailable.

2. The Gelao

As has been reported before, the Gelao are divided into four or five linguistic subgroups, Edmondson 1991 and Chang and Edmondson 1994. These subgroups are classified roughly in a geographic pattern by Zhang 1993: (1) Southwestern Guizhou-- $\text{t}^{\text{h}}\text{u}^{53}$ or White Gelao; (2) Northcentral Guizhou-- $\text{h}^{\text{h}}\text{kei}^{33}$ or Green Gelao; (3) Central Guizhou--the Klau/Qau or Cape Draping Gelao; and (4) Western Guizhou-- $\text{pu}^{55}\text{yu}^{55}$ or Mountain Gelao. There may be or have been another group, the Red Gelao, that is found in vanishingly few numbers in Hoàng Su Phì District of Hà Giang Province. According to Hoàng (1994), the three kinds of Gelao in Vietnam call themselves: (1) Tù Đư or White Gelao; (2) Hô Ki or Green Gelao; and (3) Voa Đê or Red Gelao. It is easy to recognize the connection between $\text{t}^{\text{h}}\text{u}^{53}$ and Tù Đư, even without knowing that both are called White Gelao. Similarly, the $\text{h}^{\text{h}}\text{kei}^{33}$ and the Hô Ki are presumably the same. The Red Gelao remain a mystery. According to statements of people who studied this group some 20 years ago, there was no one then who could speak fluently and in fact the only speaker at all was a shaman who could still sing some of the funeral songs without understanding their meaning. In China the Red Gelao are reported last to have lived far to the east in Liping County on the Guizhou-Hunan border.

The Gelao in China are found today in mixed villages in Guizhou and also in Longlin County, Guangxi Province, near the Sino-Vietnam border south of Maguan, and as noted, in Hà Giang Province at Đồng Văn and Hoàng Su Phì Districts. It is somewhat risky to connect dots and expect to get clear picture. From the typology of the settlements and their own accounts the White and Green Gelao groups have a vector pointing from Guizhou into Vietnam.

3. The Kam.

It was reported in *Các dân tộc ít người ở Việt Nam (các tỉnh phía bắc)* (1978) that a small number of Kam speakers migrated from Guizhou about 160 years ago to Tuyên Quang Province Yên Sơn District in northern Vietnam and have lived there since mixed with several other groups, including the Kinh (Vietnamese), Dao (Yao), and Tày. Some language data were also given in the *Về Vấn Đề Xác Định Thành Phần Các Dân Tộc Thiểu Số ở Miền Bắc Việt Nam* (1975:308-9).

The first author was able to conduct a three day study of this language in company with Professors Hoàng Văn Hanh and Hoàng Văn Ma of the Linguistics Institute of the National Centre for Social and Human Sciences in October 1995. With the help of local authorities we believe we contacted the best and perhaps the last effective speaker of Kam in Vietnam, Mr. Thạch Kim Đông or in Chinese Shi Jindong 石金侗.

As far as the linguistic features of Viet Kam are concerned, we found that Mr. Đông speaks a kind of Kam that has not split its tones as fully as most kinds. Kam is one of the languages of Asia that has carried out tone splitting rather far. As has been described by Liang Min (1984), Wang (1984), Edmondson (1992a), and Edmondson and Yang (1988), the Kam spoken at Rongjiang in Guizhou Province in SE Guizhou Miao-Kam Autonomous Prefecture applied the rule of tone splitting twice. That led to nine tones in open syllables and an additional six in closed syllables (noting that the DL tones mirror the pitch trajectories of the C tones and DS tones mirror the trajectory of the A tones). In fact, this splitting of tones a second time occurred in four of the six geographic areas. These locations have what we might call *maximal splitting*.

Not all Kam locations were so generous with tone splits. In two places—namely area 5 (in extreme southwest Guizhou at Congjiang Guandong) and areas 6 in Rongshui County of Guangxi Province on the very southern edge of Kam-speaking territory—there are fewer tones than in most places, but for that they have preserved a larger inventory of consonant initials. What we might call *minimal splitting*. We found that Mr. Đông speaks a kind of Kam that has six tones, not nine, a type with minimal splitting. In fact, he speaks unmistakably the kind of Kam found in Area 5. The organization of his tones may be described as follow (the numbers after the category are the tone values according to Y.R. Chao's scale-of-five systems):

Proto tone A	Proto tone B	Proto tone C	Proto tone DL	Proto tone DS
Tone 1 44	Tone 3 24	Tone 5 53	Tone 7L 13	Tone 7S 44
Tone 2 212	Tone 4 31	Tone 6 33	Tone 8L 31	Tone 8S 11

The main community of Kam speakers is found in SE Guizhou bordering on and overlapping into Hunan and Guangxi. It is an area some distance from the basic north-south line connecting the Gelao to Vietnam. The Kam represent the easternmost entry to the language corridor.

4. The Pa-hng

We have described the Pa-hng (Red Yao) language of Guangxi Province, China (Edmondson 1992b). It was mentioned there that there were also Pa-hng in Guizhou and Pa-hng (Pa Then) and Na'e in northern Vietnam. It is now possible to report more details about the Pa-hng of Vietnam. In October 1995 we interviewed Mr. Lý Văn Míng (46 years of age) and Mr. Phan Văn Đông (45 years of age) both from Hồng Quang Village of Chiêm Hoa District in Tuyên Quang Province. Mr. Phan was a Pa-hng and Mr. Lý was a Sui married to a Pa-hng. Each of them spoken several languages including Vietnamese, Pa-hng, Sui, Tày, and some Guan Hua (the kind of Mandarin spoken on the Sino-Vietnam Border). The analysis here is based on examples produced by Mr. Phan, although he was occasionally coached by Mr. Lý. They were both agriculturalists and had spent their entire lives in the village. They report that Pa-hng speakers are found in several other settlements in their area and also in Bắc Quang in Hà Giang Province to the north. Pa-hng in Vietnam are called the Miao Hoa or Flowery Miao.

There are eight tones in Tuyên Quang Pa-hng, organized according to their historical sources as follows (the numbers after the category are the tone values according to Y.R. Chao's scale-of-five system and dots under the number indicate breathy voice quality):

Proto tone A	Proto tone B	Proto tone C	Proto tone D
Tone1 42	Tone3 44?	Tone5 55	Tone7 55?
Tone2 33	Tone4 11	Tone6 22	Tone8 31

The Pa-hng of Guangxi Province (cf. Chang Kun 1947 and Edmondson 1992b) have different tone values than those found in the Pa-hng of Hồng Quang. The tone values for Guangxi Pa-hng are: 1=24; 2=22; 3=11; 4=11; 5=55; 6=44; 7=53; and 8=41. The Pa-hng tone values gathered by Chang Kun at Yongcong, Guizhou (today called Congjiang) are: 1=24; 2=33; 3=22; 4=11; 5=53; 6=44; 7=53; and 8=31. Notably, in Hồng Quang (like Yongcong) the B tone has split, whereas as in Guangxi data this tone either remerged or never split. Unlike the other two locations Tones 3 and 7 in Hồng Quang end in a glottal stop or closure. Very generally, this form of Pa-hng is rather different from either the Guangxi kinds or the Yongcong kinds. For that reason we believe that Viet Pa-hng may correspond to that found to the west in Rongjiang, Sandu, and Libo Counties of Guizhou. Research is currently underway to pinpoint its location more precisely. If this hypothesis hold up, then it would account for the current ties between the Sui and Pa-hng and suggest that they may have journeyed together from the Sandu Guizhou area into Tuyên Quang in Vietnam.

5. The Sui

The Thủy or Sui nationality of Vietnam is one of the smallest. According *Các dân tộc ít người ở Việt Nam (các tỉnh phía bắc)* 1978 there were only 55 Sui speakers. The population today numbers about 100. They are all located in Hồng Quang Village of Chiêm Hoa District in Tuyên Quang Province. Hồng Quang is located about 62 km to the NW of Chiêm Hoa city near the border with Hà Giang. According to the old people, eight families moved to Vietnam; the time of settlement is unknown. The Sui there live with the Pa Then or Pa-hng and the Tày. In October 1995 we collected data on this language and will report later on it in detail.

Much of the material on the Sui language of China, aside from the well-known studies by Li Fang Kuei, has not been published. Li collected data at three locations; Chinese scholars have since gathered more at nine locations: (1) Guizhou Sandu Sandong 三洞; (2) Guizhou Sandu Zhonghe 中和; (3) Guizhou Sandu Jiujian 九千; (4) Guizhou Sandu Yaoqing 瑶庆; (5) Guizhou Sandu Hengfeng 恒丰; (6) Guizhou Sandu Shuilong 水龙; (7) Guizhou Duyun Pandong 潘洞; (8) Guizhou Rongjiang County 榕江; (9) Guizhou Sandu Yang'an 阳安. We can determine that the Sui spoken in *Hông Quang* is similar to that in locations 2 or 3 and differs in some respects to that of the other places. The diagnostic vocabulary from *Suiyu Diaocha Baogao* (1958) are given here with the number of their location:

1. 'blood' *phjaɿʔ* (*Hông Quang*) vs. *phaɿʔ* (4) but *phjaɿʔ* elsewhere.
2. 'paddy' *ɿa⁵* (*Hông Quang*) vs. *ɿa⁵* (1, 2, 6); *ɿa⁵* (3,4,5); *ga⁵* (7-9).
3. 'right' *fa¹* (*Hông Quang*) vs. *fa¹* (1-6, 8, 9); *va¹* (7).
4. 'high' *vaŋ¹* (*Hông Quang*) vs. *vaŋ¹* (1-8) vs. *phaŋ¹* (9).
5. 'house' *ɿaŋ²* (*Hông Quang*) vs. *ɿaŋ²* (2-9) vs. *ɿaŋ¹* (1, Suiqing)

More data need to be examined before the homeland of the Viet Sui can be determined exactly. But it appears that the kind spoken in *Hông Quang* is like that spoken at Jiujian and Hengfeng in Sandu County. As far as is known, Sui is found only in three counties of Guizhou Province: Sandu, Libo, and Duyun, and one county of Guangxi Province, Rongshui.

6. Bolyu and Bagan

There are also two Mon-Khmer languages that lie on the language corridor. They are Bolyu and a newly discovered language called Bagan. A detailed study of Bagan by Li Jinfang will appear later. We give here a cursory sketch of it. The Bolyu live in Longlin Various Nationalities Autonomous County 隆林各族自治县 in extreme western Guangxi, population is about 800, cf. Edmondson and Gregerson to appear. Some Bolyu are said to live in Yunnan Province as well. Bolyu has six tones and SVO typology in regard to word order. Its phonological and lexical properties are outline in Edmondson 1994.

The Bagan number nearly 3000 and are found in the mountainous areas of southern Guangnan 广南 and northern Xichou 西畴 Counties in the southeastern part of Yunnan Province. The Bagan live in the following seven villages: 老挖龙 Laowalong [pə⁵⁵lun¹³], 新挖龙 Xinwalong [pə⁵⁵tsun¹³], 九平 Jiuping [pə⁵⁵tsian³¹], 石北坡 Shibeipo [pə⁵⁵ce¹³], 新寨 Xinzhai [li³¹lan¹³], 马龙 Manlong [pə⁵⁵yu³¹] and 那拉 Nala. The Bagan and the Han Chinese live together in Jiuping, Xinzhai, and Nala; the other four villages are exclusively inhabited by Bagan. The Bagan call themselves [pə⁵⁵kan³³] in their own language, the surrounding Han call them Hualo or 花族 Huazu 'colorful people' because the Bagan women wear colorful traditional dresses made from sewing together triangular swathes of printed cloth. The Bagan do not consider themselves to be natives of Guangnan and Xichou but came here before the Han, the Miao/Hmong, and the Yao. Some Bagan people say their ancestors originated from Jiangxi, Sichuan, and Guizhou Provinces and have lived in Guangnan and Xichou for 10 or more generations. The Bagan celebrate their own New Year's festival in April of the Chinese Lunar Calendar. During the festival days they sing native or Han songs, and dance together to music of the pə³¹, a kind of Bagan instrument made of bamboo and calabashes. Nowadays only a few old people are able to sing their native songs. The Bagan male clothing is the same as the Han's, females are accustomed to wearing long black skirts, colorful dresses, and headwraps. The Bagan used to marry only within their own ethnic group, but

in recent times a few Bugan girls have married Han young men. The most common family names are nine in number and are: 李 Li, 王 Wang, 郭 Guo, 罗 Lou, 严 Yan, 卢 Lu, 普 Pu and Yi. All Bugan people speak their mother tongue and adults also can speak Chinese. There is no variation in the Bugan language.

As for the Bugan language, there is a double series of initials in the sound system, prenasalized and plain for stops and affricates. Most vowels possess a tense and lax contrast. Final consonants, stops and tones are prone to change. A part of the vocabulary can be pronounced with either final nasal or stop (same place of articulation), some words (but not in context) can be pronounced in two different tones. Sandhi changes are usual, especially tone changes; there are also some blends caused by fusion of syllables. sau³³ 'bird' bi³¹ 'two' biə³³ 'classifier' ~ sau³³ biə¹³ 'two birds', wi³¹ 'we' bi³¹ 'two' pau³¹ 'classifier' ~ wi³¹ biə³¹ 'we two', lə³¹ 'auxiliary, belong to' ɔ³¹ 'I' ~ liə⁵⁵ 'mine, belong to me'. Compared with the surrounding languages (Han, Zhuang, Yi/Lolo, Miao/Hmong, or Yao), Bugan syllables are rather subject to change.

The Bugan language has 36 initials; /ʔ/ appears only before vocalic onset. Voiced ~ voiceless, aspirated ~ unaspirated are contrastive features in some stops and double initials of 'nasal + affricate', /p b ph k g kh t d th mts mtsh mdz/. There are five of 'nasal + stop', /mb ng nq md nd ŋ/. The duration of these initials is longer than that of corresponding stops /b g q d/ ʔ but the nasal resonance is not especially strong, sometimes it is only slightly perceptible, the same as /mts mtsh mdz/. With the tone 31, the nasal /m/ of /mts mtsh mdz/ is pronounced as a stop /p/- ---- mtse³¹ ~ ptse³¹ 'three', mtsha³¹ ~ ptsha³¹ 'to rub with the hands, make a cord'. Before the rhymes of the onset of /-i-/, initial /ts-/ is palatalized to [tɕ-] ---- tshiou³¹ ~ tɕhiou³¹ 'to sneeze', tɕiu³⁵ ~ tɕiu³⁵ 'to have money on sb.'. The double initial /ŋg/ sometimes is pronounced as nasal [ŋ] ---- ŋga³¹ ~ ŋa³¹ 'yellow'. Words with /g-ŋq- md- mdz-/ are few, in my record, there is only one word for each of /g-ŋq- ---- gam³⁵ 'to stab', ŋqu³³ 'village'.

The Bugan language has 90 rhymes. Tense and lax vowels are contrastive: kui³³ 'fire smoke' ~ kui³³ 'to dry by smoke', lun³³ 'well' ~ luy³³ 'abyss, deep cave'. Compared to the lax vowels, the tense vowel tongue position is lower and further back, the /a/ in ta³¹ 'near' is [a], but the /a/ in tɕa³¹ 'to bet' is close to [ɑ]. With the rising tonal syllables, the tense vowels are easy to hear; the laryngeal setting is the tensest, but the laryngeal setting is weak in the words with the falling tone (31). There are three final stops, /-p -t -k/; they are unreleased. Words with final stops are few; these words appear only with tone 55, 33, 31 (only two with the tone 33 in my record). Some words can be pronounced either with final nasal or stop (same place of articulation) or even be lost altogether: nam⁵⁵ ~ nap⁵⁵ 'to close one's mouth', ɕet⁵⁶ ~ ɕen⁵⁵ 'goat', biak⁵⁵ ~ biaŋ⁵⁵ 'grape', pə⁵⁵ bop³¹ ~ pə⁵⁵ bou³¹ 'head', nuk³¹ ~ no³¹ 'to come', wak³¹ ~ wa³¹ 'iron pot'. A few words with nasalized vowels lose nasalization and become oral rhyme syllables, or lose the final and become nasalized vowel rhymes -sə³³ ~ sa³³ 'eight', laj³¹ ~ lă³¹ 'horse'. Those rhymes /iä iap uä em ɔ ä/ appear only in Han and Zhuang borrowings. There is only one word with rhymes /iäu iäm iä iap iak em ɕm ɕk ən ɔ/ for each contrast. Most of those words are with final nasal or stop, and some are borrowings. Moreover, /uak/ appears only with one suffix syllables: ho³¹ 'slow'; ŋuak³¹ 'very slow'.

There are six live tones: two levels (55, 33), two risings (35, 13), one falling (31) and the slight tone (atonality) 'o'. The slight tone 'o' appears only in some prefixes. The dead tones have pitch shapes 55, 33, 31. Dead tones occur with either lax vowel syllables or tense vowel syllables. Tones are shaky in Bugan, part of

words can be pronounced with two tones, $\text{zou}^{33/55}$ 'earth', $\text{do}^{13/33}$ 'to burn the grass on waste land, for cultivation', $\text{tsa}^{13/53}$ 'to bite', $\text{xau}^{55/31}$ 'valley', $\text{mtshi}^{55/13}$ 'to milk', $\text{le}^{13/35}$ 'the sting of a bee or wasp', $\text{tsi}^{33/35}$ 'to stretch out (one's hand)', etc. Tonal change is common in context, and many cases are progressive assimilation, $\text{m}\ddot{\text{a}}^{55}\text{x}\ddot{\text{e}}^{55/31}$ 'taste bad', $\text{m}\ddot{\text{a}}^{55}\text{n}\ddot{\text{a}}\text{m}^{35/35}$ 'one year', $\text{bi}^{31}\text{n}\ddot{\text{a}}\text{m}^{31/35}$ 'two year', $\text{n}\ddot{\text{a}}\text{m}^{33/35}\text{ni}^{33}$ 'this year', $\text{y}\ddot{\text{o}}^{13}\text{t}\ddot{\text{e}}\text{n}^{33/35}$ 'very crowded', $\text{p}\ddot{\text{a}}^{0}\text{l}\ddot{\text{o}}\text{ŋ}^{35/33}$ 'the upper'. The Bugu are much closer to the Vietnamese border than Bolyu, and it is in direct line from Guizhou into Vietnam.

7. Conclusion.

In this short paper we have suggested that there existed a preferred route of migration for minority people (and probably also for members of the Han majority) in times of stress, the language corridor. In support of this idea we have presented some data from language variation and reports from the people themselves as to their trip. In many cases the settlers in Vietnam say they came there about 150 years ago. And also according to their own accounts, their ancestors were from Guizhou Province.

If one considers specific causes for the corridor, then the historical events that come to mind are the Opium War of 1840-2 between Britain and the faltering Qing Empire and also the Taiping Rebellion of 1851. The 1840's were turbulent years with central control coming more and more into challenge both from western colonials and from homegrown rebels alike. The Taiping Rebellion broke out in Guangxi Province, spread northward through Guizhou to the Yangtze, and thence downriver to Nanjing in 1853, where the Taiping Tianguo (Great Kingdom of Heavenly Peace) was set up.

Smaller groups in Guizhou who wished to leave the area had only two choices: (1) travel from Guizhou to the south into the face of the onslaught coming from heavily populated, lowland Guangxi and Guangdong or (2) travel to the west and south to outflank it by climbing to the relative safety of the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau. While some groups may have taken the first route, as they say that they travelled over water to arrive in Vietnam, cf. *Các dân tộc ít người ở Việt Nam* 1978. We believe that surface transportation also provided an important exit out of the area. And moreover, if the overland exodus was taken, then there were not a lot of choices of routes. Navigating rivers out of Yunnan was risky. As FitzGerald (1993:41) puts it, the descent from the Plateau "is very steep and the gorges of many rivers lie cross the way. The valley of the Red River, which forms the rich delta of Tongking, is malarial and narrow." Moreover, the Vietnamese lowlands were already heavily populated. Nevertheless, Chinese traders had been making the journey for a long time and they probably furnished guides.

In 1857 a Muslim revolt began in Yunnan, especially in the territory between Kunming and Dali. These additional events would have no doubt propelled all but the stoutest of hearts further to the south. Indeed, it appears that some groups rested just short of the very edge of the Chinese empire with Vietnam and there awaited events. Usually, they travelled the rivers, the Sông Lô Giang or the Red River. Many crossed over to settle just opposite them on the Vietnam side.

So today, the result is that a number of groups, for instance in the case of the Tai Branch, the Thu Lao (Central Tai group), the Pa Di (Southwestern Tai group), the Bô Y, and the Giáy (both Northern Tai groups), all dwell in a confined area. But this situation is not at all like the great rivers of Asia, the Yangtze, the Mekhong, and the Salween, which begin within 50 km of each other only to empty into the sea

at locations as distant as Shanghai, Ho Chi Minh City, and Yangon. It is in fact the inverse of that, a confluence of peoples, brought together by the vagaries of geography and the fortunes of war into a conduit we have called the language corridor. Indeed, it is likely that we will find other undiscovered languages along this route, where weary travelers stopped.

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