

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF RICE CULTURE WORDS IN THE GE-YANG AND KAM-TAI LANGUAGES

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1 Introduction

Ecological linguistics is a new branch of linguistic science that has just sprung up in recent years. It studies the connection between human languages, the natural ecological environment, and the socio-cultural environment. Ethnic groups (or speakers of certain languages) living in different natural geographical environments may have different numbers of words expressing the same natural phenomena. For instance, people, such as the Eskimos who live near the North Pole have different words for “snow” with different shapes, different colors, and those that fall in different periods of time within the day. The Mongolians, the Kazaks are traditional nomadic ethnic groups. In their languages, cattle of different sex, different age and even female cattle having given birth to young cattle or not are named with different word forms. Ethnic groups who cultivate rice often have plenty of words or expressions for every detail of the process of rice planting and related cultural activities. The Kam-Tai speakers are traditional rice cultivators having thousands of years of rice planting history. Today, most of them still take up rice planting as their means of livelihood. Ge-Yang comprises a group of languages that are related to Kam-Tai languages. The Ge-Yang people have a rather close historical relationship with speakers of Kam-Tai languages. They all are distributed throughout the same geographical area and belong to the same economy-culture type. This paper attempts to make a comparison between the rice cultivation words between these two groups and investigates the similarities and differences between their respective rice cultures.

2 The Relationship Between the Ge-Yang and the Kam-Tai Groups

Ge-Yang is a new term that has appeared in the works of some Chinese scholars ever since the 1990s. Prof. Liang Min created the term for the first time in one of his papers discussing the matter of which group do such languages as Gelao, Mulao, Lachi, Pubiao, Yuren, Buyang, etc. belong. Some Western scholars called them “Kadai” languages or “Tai-Kadai” languages as part of the Kam-Tai group. As Ge-Yang languages are closely connected to the Kam-Tai group, they are therefore also mentioned as “Outlier Kam-Tai” languages in the works or papers of some Western scholars.

Kam-Tai is a well-known group of languages that includes the Thai, Lao, Shan in Southeast Asia. They have large numbers of speakers and include many other small languages. In China, Kam-Tai includes three branches, that is, the Tai branch (called Zhuang-Dai by Chinese scholars) consisting of Zhuang, Buyi, and Dai, the Kam-Sui branch (called Dong-Shui by Chinese scholars), consisting of Kam (also called Dong), Sui, Muolao, Maonan, Lajia, etc., and the Hlai branch which includes only the Hlai language. The data of this paper are mainly collected from the Kam-Tai languages in China.

The Ge-Yang speakers and the Kam-Tai peoples of mainland China are mostly distributed mainly in southern provinces such as Guangxi, Guizhou, Hunan, Yunnan, Hainan and Guangdong. Most of the Ge-Yang language speakers live in the central and the western part of Guizhou, and only a few of them live in scattered places in Yunnan and Guangxi. Each language has only a small number of speakers. The Gelao, which is the biggest in the group, has about five to six thousand speakers, while other languages have only several hundred or even fewer than a hundred. All of them are seriously endangered languages. The Yuren language of this group became extinct in the late 1980s. Some of the data in this paper are cited from the works of such scholars as Zhang Jimin, Liang Min, and Jerry Edmondson, who have been engaged in the study of the Ge-Yang group for a long time. Most of the data were collected in fieldwork done by myself and my colleague, Li Jinfang, along with some of his students.

The ancestors of the Kam-Tai peoples can be traced back to the Yue peoples of more than 2000 years ago. At the historical stage marked by from the Spring and Autumn Period (722-481 B.C.) up to the Warring States Period (481-221 B.C), the Yue people were distributed all over the areas of southern China. The Yue people lived in the area stretching from the southeastern coast to the northern part of Vietnam. The Yue people had so many branches that they were usually called Baiyue (Hundred Yue) in Han Chinese historical documents. The Kam-Tai peoples today mainly originate from the Yue who were distributed throughout Guangdong, Guangxi, and the southeastern part of the Yunnan and the Guizhou plateau. They were referred to as Luoyue, Xi'ou and Nanyue respectively in historical books. Among Chinese scholars there is a viewpoint claiming that the Kam-Tai peoples (mainly the Tai group) distributed in Southeast Asia and the western part of Yunnan were formed by emigrants from Guangxi and the eastern part of Yunnan about 1500 years ago. The ancestors of the Ge-Yang speakers can be traced back to the Pu people of more than 3000 years ago. Pu was also a group of ancient peoples that were widely distributed throughout southern China and had many branches that were called Baipu (The Hundred Pu) in Han Chinese historical documents. During the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring Period, the Yunnan and Guizhou plateau was an area inhabited by both the Yue and the Pu peoples. The latter were mainly distributed in Guizhou. At the end of the 3rd century B.C, the Qin empire took over Nanyue and Xiyue (both were branches of the Yue peoples) by armed force. Many Yue people were forced to move northward into Guizhou to live together with the Pu people there. In the course of long-term contact and intercommunication, Pu and Yue were gradually mixed, and their cultural features became similar. For instance, the Ganlan style of dwelling house of the ancient Yue people was not only inherited by their descendents (i.e., the Zhuang, the Sui, the Kam and many Tai groups of people in Southeast Asia), but also by some of the Gelao people who originated from the ancient Pu. The custom of knocking out the canine teeth can be found among the Zhuang, the Kam, and the Gelao. It is hard to say from which ancient group of people the custom came. As to the ancient language, there can be found many records of the language of the ancient Yue in Chinese historical books. For instance, in a book named *Shuoyan* (literally translated as "The World of Speech") written in the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 200), a folk song of the Yue people was taken down in Han Chinese characters. It is found that the language structure of the folk song is quite similar to that of the modern Kam-Tai languages. Because of the lack of historical records, people know very little about the language of the ancient Pu. From the differentiation seen

between the language structure of modern Ge-Yang and Kam-Tai before the contact of these two group, these languages should be greatly different, but for hundreds of years of intercommunication and assimilation since the end of the Warring Period, these two groups had not only become similar in culture, but they also had many common linguistic features, and these common features are mainly shown in their vocabulary. Professor Liang Min from the Chinese Social Academy of Science made a comparison between the Ge-Yang and the Kam-Tai languages with Swadesh's 200 word list, and found that the highest ratio of cognates between these two groups are the cognates between the Zhuang language and the Buyang language (32.34%), a little bit higher than the cognate ratio among the languages in the Ge-yang group itself. The cognate ratio between the Buyang language and Gelao in Anshun of Guizhou Province is 31.41%. (Liang 1990) What is worth noticing is that the cognate ratio between the Anshun Gelao language and the Hlai language, and between the Sanchong Gelao language and the Hlai, the speakers of which do not live in the same areas, are both higher than that between the Zhuang and the Kam languages. A reasonable explanation of this phenomena is that among the Yue people who immigrated northward, there were some people who had close relationships with the Hlai people who are now living in Hainan island and had merged into the Gelao group.

In a word, the vocabulary similarities between the Ge-Yang and the Kam-Tai groups are the result of language contact, cultural intercommunication and assimilation.

The Kam-Tai peoples are traditional rice cultivators. Nowadays, many scholars believe that the Kam-Tai ancestors, i.e. the Yue peoples, were the creators and disseminators of rice culture in Asia. Today, most of the Kam-Tai peoples still live in flat areas with rich water resources that make it easy for rice to grow, whereas most of the Ge-Yang people live in high mountain areas. Because of the geographical and climatic condition, they mainly plant such crops as corn, wheat, potatoes, etc., which are cold-resistant and drought-enduring. At the same time, they also plant some rice. A small number of them who inhabit the lower flat areas also plant rice as their main crop. The current living status of the Ge-Yang people is the result of historical movements. At first, most of them also lived in flat areas and were engaged in rice planting, As the Han Chinese moved in and formed settlements with large populations, the Ge-Yang peoples were forced to move into the mountains. Today, the Gelao people (the main part of the Ge-Yang speakers) in most places still consider themselves the oldest ethnic group in Guizhou, because wet rice fields and dry lands there were opened up by their ancestors. Every year in July or August, when the crops are ripe, the Gelao people will go the rice fields to cut the spikes, bring them home, and taste the new crop. They do not only cut their own rice, but can also cut the rice which belongs to other families or even other ethnic groups, and people won't say anything about this.

A change in the living environment must bring about a change of means of living. Because of the moving from low flat land to high mountains, the economic structure of the Ge-Yang ancestors changed from rice cultivating to highland planting and hunting. They usually replenish the shortage of food supply by seasonal hunting because of the impoverished soil. In most of the Ge-Yang languages, we can see that rice culture vocabulary is quite different from those in the Kam-Tai languages, but from the small number of cognates, we can still see the influence of the Yue rice culture on its neighboring ethnic groups.

Notes

Many thanks are given here to the Henry R. Luce Foundation for its generous support of our fieldwork, research, publication, and my personal travel and short-term residence at Northern Illinois University in the U.S.

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