

SINIFICATION OF THE ZHUANG PEOPLE, CULTURE, AND THEIR LANGUAGE

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0 Introduction

Most Zhuang people live in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, the Wenshan Zhuang-Miao Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province. There are also some Zhuang isolates in Guangdong, Guagnzhou, Hainan, and Hunan provinces. In Guangxi, there are 52 counties populated by the Zhuang people. The Zhuang people make up 90% of the total population in nine counties, 50% of that in 39 counties. According to “The Fourth Survey” of the national census conducted by the CCP in 1990, the total population of the Zhuang people was 15,555,802; now it is estimated to be 17 million, ranking as the largest ethnic minority in the People’s Republic of China.¹

The autononyms of the Zhuang vary from place to place. They are variously called Bouxcuengh, Bouxyaex, Bouxnoengz, Bouxdoj, Bouxmbanj, Bouxraeuz, Bouxrungh, and so on. Zhuang is the official government name for this native ethnic group that has its origins in South China. The Zhuang language is a member of Tai language family and of Sino-Tibetan stock, according most Chinese linguists. It is divided into the Northern and Southern dialects with two rivers, the Youjiang and the Yongjiang, as boundaries. Northern Zhuang speakers make up 68% of the total Zhuang population; Southern Zhuang speakers make up 32%.

Zhuang is the main means of communication in daily life, but Chinese is the only language that is used on official occasions. Among the nine counties where the Zhuang make up 90% of the total local population, the Zhuang language is spoken on most occasions, except those that are official in nature. In eighteen counties where the Zhuang make up 70-80% of the total population, Zhuang language is the farmers’ daily language. According to a random survey, Zhuang monolinguals make up 42.29% of total Zhuang population, while Zhuang-Chinese bilinguals make up 54.72%.²

The number of Zhuang-Chinese bilinguals has grown rapidly in the past 50 years of CCP (Chinese Communist Party) rule, especially since the 1980s, when China opened its doors to foreign countries. The Communist Party administrative government felt it was so hard to work in the Zhuang region in the 1950s because of the language barrier. However, nowadays it is easier because half of the total Zhuang population can speak Chinese. My parents’ village (Manlongrang) is a perfect example. It is a pure Zhuang village where there are only three family names, Huang, Ban, and Lu. Before the communist liberation in 1949 there was only one educated man, Huang Dingmen who went to high school in Nanning (the capital of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region) and could read and speak Mandarin Chinese. Another man who worked as a porter in Baise city could speak Cantonese. They were the only two Zhuang-Chinese bilinguals living in the village at that time. The number of bilinguals has rapidly grown since the 1950s, as shown in Table 1.³

Ratree Wayland, John Hartmann & Paul Sidwell, eds. *SEALSXII: papers from the 12th meeting of the Southeast Asian Linguistics Society* (2002). Canberra, Pacific Linguistics, 2007, pp.89-100.

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As the data in the table show, the total number of bilinguals by the end of the 1990s was almost three times as many as those by the end of 1980s. By the end of the 1980s it was almost double that of the end of the 1970s, and eight times as many as by the end of the 1950s. One new phenomenon that has been of growing concern since 1980s is that Mandarin Chinese gradually became the first language of some of the bilinguals. By the end of the 1990s some teenagers had already lost their mother tongue and are now monolingual Chinese speakers.

There is no doubt that the Zhuang language is an endangered language, although it will not disappear in the next one or two generations. Still, we cannot ensure it will not face and end as a human language in the next few hundreds years. In an attempt to understand the historical process of Zhuang language change and endangerment, this paper will discuss the forces that have influenced the use of the Zhuang language over time.

Table 1: *Change in Languages Spoken in Manlongran Village: 1940s-1990s*

Time (end of)	Population of Man- longrang	Languages used				Bilingual	Over three languages
		Zhuang	Guiliuhua*	Cantonese	Mandarin		
1940s	120	120	0	1	1	2	
1950s	167	167	3	1	2	5	1
1960s	234	234	5	4	6	12	3
1970s	387	387	7	13	14	21	12
1980s	500	490	9	31	29	41	34
1990s	600	570	11	46	140	130	72

(*Guiliuhua, is commonly spoken in Liuzhou prefecture and Guilin Prefecture in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. It is a subdialect of the Chinese dialect called Guanhua.)

1 Sinification of the Zhuang Language

According to historical records, the Zhuang territories were to be loyal to their Han rulers as “one member of United China.” In 214 B.C., the Qinshi Emperor waged a strong military campaign against the Baiyue in Lingnan and occupied the area called “South of the Mountains.”⁴ From then on, the Emperor began to administer Lingnan and ruled the minorities there directly or indirectly.

The motivations that led the Chinese Imperial government to rule the minority territories was obviously not only to occupy the land but also to make profit from it. Despite these motivations, the central imperial government began to promote a series of policies for governing the ethnic minorities. The one with the greatest impact was Sinification. The goal of Sinification was to control the minority groups forever in all fields - politics, economics and culture - by importing Chinese culture and then weakening and eliminating the ethnic nationalistic consciousness that could lead to the desire to be independent states.

Sinification issues historically have involved: 1) forcing vast numbers of Han Chinese to migrate and mix with minority groups so as to allow the Han culture natural penetration; 2) encouraging Han Chinese to marry with minority peoples so as to let Chinese culture penetrate local family structures; 3) forcing minority groups to learn Han language and culture directly, especially from the formative teenage years on.

After the cessation of war on minority groups in Lingnan, the Qinshi Emperor began his first step to Sinicize the original inhabitants of Lingnan by moving some Han people from the central China and “forcing them to live with the Baiyue”. The Qinshi Emperor sent 15,000 women from central China to Guangxi. A year later (222 B.C), he sent 500,000 military agricultural colonists to the Zhuang region in eastern Guangxi and western Guagndong. These Han people were the people in the main who imported Chinese culture to the Zhuang people when they penetrated the area and lived among the Zhuang. After the Qin dynasty ended, there were many times that vast numbers of Han people moved into the Zhuang territories. According to historical records, there were four large waves of immigrants who fled to Guangxi to avoid warfare and famine in the north. The first time this happened was during the Yongjia years of the Western Tsin Dynasty (307-312 A.D.) at the beginning of the fourth century A.D. At that time in central China sixteen states were engaged in wars against each other. There were numerous Han refugees who emmigrated into the Lingnan region as a result. The Guangxi population increased quickly to ten times the size of what it was in the early Sui dynasty Daye Five year (609 A.D.) from Liu Song Daming Eight year (464 A.D.). The second time occured in the later Tang dynasty (618-907 A.D.). Again the states in central China were engaged in wars, and a large number of Han escaped from their “homeland” and fled to Guangxi. The third time occurred at the end of the Southern Song period in the 13 century. The Song and the Yuan (Mongol Dynasty) made war against each other to gain power. Again, as a result, there were a lot of Han immigrants who moved to Guangxi as refugees and made the population increase by about 440,000 homes in the Sun-Yuan year (1330 A.D.)⁵ when there were only about 280,000 homes in the North Song Yuan-Feng Three Year (1080 A.D.). The forth time happened during the end of Yuan dynasty and the beginning of the Qing dynasty. There were large numbers of Han from Hunan and Hubei provinces who moved into the Zhuang region to avoid famine.

The main reason that the Guangxi population increased so quickly was that, in addition to the natural increase in the minority population, the Han immigrants from north China infiltrated the south in such large numbers. The Han population penetration of the Zhuang area was in eastern Guangxi and western Guagndong first and then later in western Guangxi. The penetration into the Zhuang heartland in western Guangxi did not start until the Tang dynasty (618-907 A.D.). Han Chinese immigrated into the region not only from northern China but also from Guangdong. They moved along the Xijiang River toward the Yuejiang River, the Zuojiang River and the Youjiang River. Even In Xilin county which is located at the border of western Guangxi, there were Han immigrants by the time of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644.) From then on almost all of the Zhuang counties had Han Chinese immigrants. In the following dynasties, the Han population in Guagndong increased quickly. The Han population constituted less than 20 percent of the Guangxi population in the mid-sixteenth century. By the end of the nineteenth century this percentage had increased to over 50 % and, by the mid-twentieth century, was nearly two-thirds.

Besides promoting migration, the Qinshi Emperor forced all China to use “only one written script,” eliminated local written scripts, and forced minority people to learn and use Chinese. Liang Tingwang, a professor from the Central University for Nationalities, said (p.c.) that the ancient Zhuang had their own proto writing system but had to give it up because of the Qinshi Emperor’s tough policy and to adopt the Han Chinese writing

system, which ultimately developed into the old Zhuang demotic script (Figs. 1 & 2) alongside classical Chinese writing during the Tang dynasty (618-907 A.D).⁶

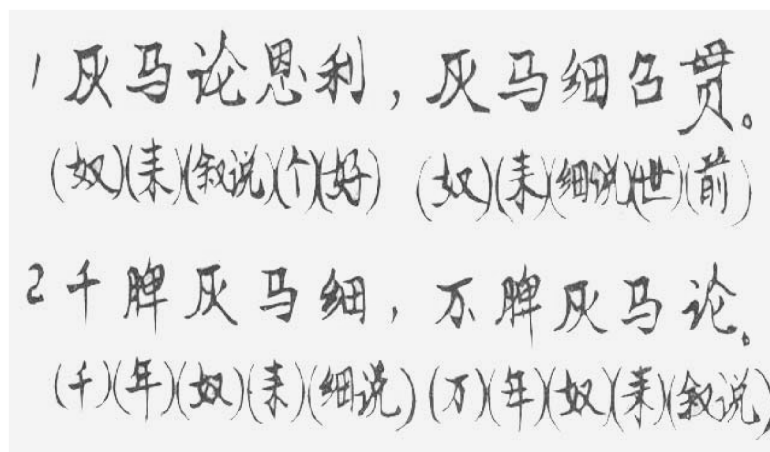


Figure 1: Old Zhuang Script

- 1 **Hoiq ma lwnh aen ndi,
Hoiq ma si ciuh gonq.**
- 2 **Cien bi hoiq ma si,
Fanh bi hoiq ma lwnh.**

Figure 2: New Zhuang Script Transcription of the Fig. 1 Text⁷

Towards the end of Qin dynasty (221-207 B.C.), a period of many peasant rebellions, Zhao Tuo claimed independence from the imperial government and created the “Nanyue Country” (Southern Yue country) in 207 B.C. in the Lingnan area and called himself “Emperor of the Southern Yue.” He led the peasants to rise up against the Qinshi Emperor. During the years when Zhao ruled Lingnan, he promoted a kind of minority policy which was known as “He Ji Baiyue” (“Unify the Baiyue”). He practiced power politics by using force on the one hand to threaten the Min-Yue, Xi’ou, and Luoyue and bribes on the other hand. He called himself “Head of the Yi-Man”⁸ He respected the Yue people’s customs, rallied their local rulers, and forced the local chiefs to be controlled by the central government administrators, but let them continue their old policies and local political traditions. In addition, he encouraged Han immigrants to marry Yue⁹ and promoted the central China Han culture among the Yue.

In the succeeding dynasties, the central Imperial rulers imitated and advanced the Qin dynasty and Han dynasty’s political policy and intensified the process of Sinification, tightening their control over the Zhuang. Though the imperial government’s administrative power in the Zhuang region began with the Qin dynasty, control over the Guagnxi area was limited. The rulers exercised direct control over the eastern portion of Guangxi, running from the eastern border of Nanning Prefecture to the western border of Guangdong. Here Han and Hakka Chinese eventually dominated and continued efforts to consolidate their administrative control over the region.

The central government maintained its normal control of western Guangxi through the *jimi* (“loose reins”) system during the Song dynasty. The *tusi* system began during the Tang dynasty and lasted until the early part of the Qing (Manchu) dynasty in Guangxi. It required local hereditary chiefs to pledge loyalty to the imperial regime but did not dictate how these rulers should govern within their independent realms.

For the more than 2,000 years that the central imperial leaders, starting with the Qinshi Emperor, who united China, ruled over Guangxi on to the end of Qing dynasty, their policy of Sinification gradually weakened the Zhuang ethnic consciousness. More and more Zhuang gave up their language and culture, chose Han Chinese culture and “became Han.” In the eastern portion of Guangxi, where the Han mixed with Zhuang, some Zhuang were forced out of their fertile land into the mountainous areas in the west. Many of the original inhabitants who still lived there but were Sinicized to the degree that they became indistinguishable from the Han. Today, there are fewer and fewer Zhuang language speakers in eastern Guangxi.

2 The Modern Period: Defects in CCP Policy and the Limitations of the New Standard Zhuang Writing System

The Communist Party began governing the Zhuang territories on November 8, 1949. On March 8, 1958 the CCP created the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, influenced by Marxist-Leninist theory of Nationalities and the Soviet model. When the CCP assumed power in Guangxi, it knew the Zhuang educational levels were lower than the national average in the province. Illiteracy rates in Zhuang areas were over 80 percent.¹⁰ The CCP realized that it was hard for them to develop Zhuang economic, cultural and political life in order for them to “catch up” to the Han and achieve its goal of “all nationalities are equal.” If the Zhuang educational level was far below the national level, it would also be hard to strengthen the consolidation of the nationalities and central control over the province. In addition to training Zhuang cadres who could effectively relate to the Zhuang and inspire the local population to comply with party directives, the party also sought to improve the general level of education throughout the Zhuang areas. Educational reform was mandatory. During the first few years of CCP rule, eradicating illiteracy and developing educational opportunities for the public were two of the primary goals of educational work. Devising and using a modern Zhuang writing system was one of the primary tools for fighting illiteracy. With the help of Soviet linguists, the central government helped the Zhuang create the new Zhuang alphabet, which was based on the Latin alphabet. In December of 1955, the National Council ratified the plans for the alphabet and promoted it in 1957. In 1981 the new alphabet was revised so that only Latin letters were used.

In August 1958 the scope of the project was expanded, and Zhuang peasants were trained for two years in night schools, while cadres received a year of instruction. The Zhuang language was promoted as “going on to reach its first ‘high tide’.” The content of the courses changed radically during the Cultural Revolution, as might be expected. Although most of the schools remained open during the early years of the Cultural Revolution, they concentrated on spreading the party’s political message and on pronunciation rather than on reading skills. Unfortunately, all the schools were shut down at the end of the “special period.”¹¹ The peasants who were trained in the schools finally lost their reading skills and became “the new illiterate.”

Zhuang language promotion rose to a second “high tide” level in the 1980s. Efforts to promote the Zhuang written script were revived in 1984. Language committees were

reestablished, along with new experimental Zhuang language schools in twenty-two counties in Guangxi. Over the next four years the number of counties that were experimenting with Zhuang doubled to fifty-two. The Department of minority languages of ten Central College for Nationalities in Beijing was set up to recruit the first class of students to learn the Zhuang language in 1980, just after the Cultural Revolution. Over the next eight years it opened one class every two years and then closed. The Guangxi Zhuang Language School (College) opened and recruited four classes of 200 students or so each year. Most of its graduates taught in primary school. However, the plan had to be modified to run as a high school program at the end of 1990s because no more students were interested in studying the Zhuang language after the local governments announced that no special rights were available for Zhuang students to work in the minority areas. Although the college still remains open, the number of students and the content of courses radically changed to concentrate on studying in Chinese. The Guangxi Nationalities Institute recruited its first class of students for its newly established Zhuang language department in 1984. However, students expressed little interest in majoring in Zhuang. It was harder for students to find a job in comparison with other majors, since the CCP broke down the old work system of job guarantees and now let students find a job by themselves. The Zhuang language department was closed down in 2002 and merged with the Chinese department after seeing that it could not recruit enough students to open classes. As for the primary schools or middle schools, by 1988 country governments were required to subsidize the Zhuang language instruction schools, if they wanted to keep them running, and as a consequence, more than half the schools closed. By 2000 there were no real Zhuang language schools in the Zhuang areas. Zhuang Language promotion went to the level of “low tide”.

The central government provided funding in Guangxi to promote the Zhuang language in the 1950s and in early 1980s. However, as the statistics show, Zhuang language could not really develop Zhuang education to a state where it was “naturally flourishing.” Educational levels are still lower in the province than for the national average. What are the reasons?

1. The government’s minority policy is defective. As we now realize, in the past most people only recognized the functional aspects of educating students in Zhuang but did not realize its cultural role and value. The common opinion was that minority languages were simply a “bridge to a Chinese education.” As some officials and cadres said, the Zhuang language is a “walking stick” or crutch for the Zhuang people to use in learning Chinese. They can throw it away when they master Chinese. That is why so many officials and cadres believed that it was enough to open Zhuang language classes during grades 1-3 only in primary schools. From grade four on, Zhuang students would begin to learn Chinese. When we look back on this history we realize that in the Guangxi Autonomous Region, language policies could not implemented. Some cadres within the province and some of the masses did not give the cooperation and support they should have, thus affecting the implementation of autonomy rights. According to the Law of Regional Autonomy, minority nationalities are free to use, develop, and promote their language. However, in Guangxi, autonomy rights are only words not backed up by action. For certain, the Zhuang language can not be an official language. The Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region government did not pass a series of autonomy rights to ensure that the Zhuang people would be free to use their language anywhere in the province. According to

CCP policies on Zhuang rights, we discover that the policies were defective. That is, they did not set up a clear law to command regional and local governments to support, promote, and use the Zhuang language. Moreover, the government did not make enough workers and complete units (departments) available to promote Zhuang. Zhuang writing appears prominently on government gate signs alongside the Chinese equivalent, but it cannot be admitted alongside Chinese as an official language. In the Zhuang areas, some Zhuang speakers who can use the new Zhuang written script complain that they cannot write in Zhuang on pieces of mail because there are no postal officers who can deal with Zhuang writing. The central government and the autonomous government did not set up a complete educational system from primary to higher education and autonomous rights for the Zhuang to learn to use their own language and culture. As the peasants say, "Since the Zhuang language cannot be used equally alongside Chinese in standard examinations, why should we let our children waste their time learning the Zhuang language?" Education remains the primary means of social and economic upward mobility in Zhuang areas and of escaping from the poverty of the countryside. Zhuang students and their families, therefore, have an intense interest in excelling in the Han-language examinations. Through the standard state examinations, any student can theoretically rise to the top ranks of the educational system. The educational system, therefore, has proved an important integrating force now that Zhuang peasants have access to schools and hope to benefit from education. The standard examination system has made the average Zhuang less willing to learn the Zhuang language and more interested in joining in the privileges that state education has to offer.¹²

2. The Zhuang were not interested in promoting the new Zhuang written script. Nor were they interested in creating the unified Zhuang ethnic nationality. The pressure to create Zhuang Autonomous Region clearly did not come from the grassroots level. i.e, by the Zhuang themselves. Rather, the proposal was actively promoted by the central government and the Zhuang middle-level cadres. Consequently, the Zhuang students and their families have little interest in learning the new Zhuang written script because they "believe" they can not get any benefit from it.

3. The numerous dialects within the Zhuang speech region also complicates the promotion of a Zhuang written language. There are two dialects in the Zhuang areas: Northern Zhuang and Southern Zhuang.¹³ Furthermore, there are seven subdialects in Northern Zhuang: Guibei, Liujiang, Hongshuihe, Yongbei, Youjiang, Guibian, Qiubei, Lianshan. There are five subdialects in Southern Zhuang: Yongnan, Zuojiang, Dejing, Yanguang, Wenma. The population of Northern Zhuang speakers makes up 68% of the total Zhuang population, while that of Southern Zhuang speakers make up 32%. Phonologically, one of the most distinctive difference between the two dialects is that there is a set of aspirated initials in the Southern dialect that are absent in the Northern dialect. Speakers from the two dialect areas, sometimes even between two different subdialects, cannot interact effectively. They have to communicate in Mandarin, local Southwestern Chinese or Cantonese. The so-called "Standard Zhuang" is based on the Wuming county dialect which is only 40 kilometers away from Nanning, the capital of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. Wuming speech is neither Northern nor Southern Zhuang and is spoken nowhere outside Wuming county. The difference between Wuming speech and the many different dialects cannot be systematically correlated. For these reasons, students and their families feel it is too hard to learn. My former students in Guangxi Zhuang Language

College in Wuming complained that Standard Zhuang is a “new” language far different from their dialects and hard and unnatural to learn. Some students said they tried to speak standard Zhuang to their families but nobody understood what they said. These Zhuang speakers were trained in school to teach the Standard Zhuang language in primary schools in their areas after they graduated and went to work as teachers. However, some of them could not master it even after four years of study. Some of them even complained that the “Standard Zhuang” is harder than Mandarin Chinese. How can the government and university educators make people interested in learning a language which is far removed from the language of their daily life?

4. Han Cultural and Educational Pressures on the Zhuang. As mentioned before, the imperial government actively promoted a nationality policy of Sinification in Lingnan ever since the beginning of the Qin dynasty. This policy established the Han culture and educational system in minority areas and forced minority people to learn Han culture once the Han had penetrated the territories “South of The Clouds.”

In reality, Zhuang education is Han education. Formal schooling of the Zhuang began in the Qin dynasty. The Qinshi Emperor transplanted the central Han feudal policy in the Zhuang territories after his military forces occupied Lingnan. From then on the central imperial government set up its bureaucratic administration to rule the Zhuang and began to set up some schools there to popularize Confucianism. As recorded in the historical annals of Ling Hu Xi Zhuan in the chapter called *Sui Shu* (The Sui Dynasty Book): “Build cities and towns, open schools! The minorities will thank the Han and, in their response, they will called it “a great corrective training.” Since the beginning of the Tang and Song dynasties, Han education had a strong impact on the Zhuang through the Han feudal county system which fostered and enhanced it. More and more historical records about education in the Zhuang-speaking region appeared. Schools were opened by the *Fu* (prefecture), the *Zhou* (an administrative division which smaller than a prefecture but bigger than acounty), and the *Xian* (county), and were called *fixue* (Fu School), “Zhouxue” (Zhou School), *xianxue* (Xian School), respectively. The earliest *fixue* in Guangxi was the Liuzhou Fuxue, which was built during the early Tang dynasty, followed by the Guilin Fuxue, which was built during the middle of the reign of the Dali Emperor (766-779 A.D.). During the Song dynasty, many *fixue* were developed. In Guangxi alone, six new *fixue* were opened: Qingyuan Fuxue, Pingle Fuxue, Wuzhou Fuxue, Nanning Fuxue, Xunzhou Fuxue and Lianzhou Fuxue, were opened. There were more new *fixue* established during Ming dynasty and Qing dynasty. Furthermore, there were some other small schools built in the *Fu*, *Zhou* and *Xian*, such as, Confucian Schools, Shuyuan (general education schools), and Minjian Shexue (local county schools). Although these schools were patterned after the old style of education, they were effectively the same as the central Han educational system. Their goal was training officials for administrative work. The contents of the text books all were concerned with Confucian thought and values. Chinese was the only language used in class.

The new style Zhuang education began in the twentieth century with the establishment of institutes for higher education for local political chiefs, agriculture, advanced normal (teacher) training, army survey personnel, cadre training, and included other universities and colleges. From the 1930s to the end of 1940s, high schools, middle schools and primary schools were set up. By 1949, in Guangxi, there were over 17,000 primary schools, which had 1.4 million students enrolled and 17 high schools, which had a

total of 25,200 students enrolled. According to a 1990 survey, there were 460,000 high school students, who made up 32% of total students in Guangxi. The Zhuang had 2.45 million primary students; 660,000 middle or high school students; 190,000 vocational school students and 18,000 university or colleges students.

Since Zhuang education is Han education, all these Zhuang students were trained in Han language and culture. They are the main source for transplanting Han language and culture in Zhuang areas. They are trained to accept Han culture and thereby weaken their ethnic roots, slowly losing Zhuang ethnic consciousness and rapidly changing conditions in the direction of accepting Han culture. They are bilingual. However, most of the new generation will not be Zhuang speakers. In addition, the opinions and values of these new intellectuals have a powerful influence on the Zhuang around them.

3 The Cultural Prestige of Han Influences Over the Zhuang

Every “nationality”¹⁴ has its own culture. Although differing cultures cannot be labeled as good or bad, the cultures of China’s nationalities are viewed by the government as “highly developed” and “less developed.” In a system of “United Ethnic Nationalities” the culture of a “nationality” which has a “highly developed social production” enjoys a higher prestige when compared to the other “nationalities.” It seems to be human nature to choose to adopt a culture that enjoys higher prestige. Han “social productions”¹⁵ were usually considered to be higher than those of other nationalities in China. The Han culture was promoted as “highly developed,” while other nationalities’ cultures were “less developed.” Consequently, Han culture became the main standard in China which guided and influenced other nationalities’ cultures. The Han culture penetrated and influenced minority nationality cultures because of its larger population and their dominant culture.

Han culture began its penetration of the Zhuang region when the Han began to administer Lingnan in the Qin dynasty. The Zhuang culture was in an “inferior” position for the many centuries it was in contact with Han culture. The Han influenced Zhuang language and culture deeply. More and more Zhuang envied the greater prestige and power of the Han. This fundamental psychological attitude led to the acceptance of Han culture by the Zhuang. The Zhuang were intentionally Sinicized by the Imperial government for hundreds of years. Because the Zhuang culture was put in an inferior position when it came in contact with the Han culture, the Zhuang people’s cultural psychology changed radically. They had a general sense of inferiority about their culture, looking down on their traditions, believing they were too backward or too much of a “village culture” and not urban and modern enough. This sense of inferiority forced them to hide their real ethnic identity to avoid the Han racial discrimination. Meanwhile, they tried to meet the need for psychological “equality” by believing they were “Han” or “Han who spoke Zhuang.” Moreover, when the CCP wanted to help them to create a “United Zhuang” in the 1950s, they not like the idea of being singled out on the one hand and forced into a category they did not feel was part of their cultural heritage and background on the other. Even today many peasants do not know what it is to be a Zhuang, and they do not know they are Zhuang. Some do know they are ethnic Zhuang, but they are ashamed to tell an ethnic Han that they are Zhuang because it puts them in an asymmetrical power position by doing so.

Cultural prestige controls language prestige. Generally speaking, Chinese has high prestige and it has become the common language in China. It is now a “world language.” Zhuang envy the Han and want to learn the language of the Han, i.e., Mandarin Chinese. Zhuang peasants believe their language is a “backward language” in comparison to the

Han language. They hope that they and their children will become real “Han” by speaking Chinese to others. Zhuang students have a growing incentive to learn the Han language and not “waste their time” in studying their “backward language”. Chinese is the second language in Zhuang daily life, and it now is even the first language for the new generation in some areas. According to a random survey, Zhuang monolinguals make up 42.29% of the total Zhuang population, while Zhuang-Chinese bilinguals make up 54.72%.

4 Economic Pressures Compel the Zhuang to Learn Chinese

Another major reason that compels the Zhuang people to learn Chinese is the pressure of earning a living. China opened its door to foreign countries in the 1980s. The new “free market system” has been pushing Chinese economic development. However, because of a lack of technology and shortage of transportation infrastructure, the Zhuang areas are economically backward areas. There is a big gap between the Zhuang Autonomous Region and the eastern Chinese provinces. The Zhuang standard of living is far lower than it is for the Chinese in the eastern parts of China, even lower than the Chinese in the Guangxi province. According to a 1990 survey, there were almost two million peasants living under the poverty line in Guangxi. Most of them are Zhuang. It is far different for the Han who fled into the Zhuang areas to avoid famine hundreds of years ago. Hundreds of thousands of Zhuang peasants have been forced to leave their home villages to avoid poverty and flood into Chinese cities to look for jobs. Because of the new economic situation they find themselves in, the Zhuang people have to learn and use Chinese.

Another issue within the recent political and economic reforms is changing the old way that the government allotted students jobs after graduation and offered them guidance, if not guarantees. Now students must look for jobs by themselves. Zhuang students don’t want “waste their time” in learning to read and write Zhuang because university students are not able to take their examinations in the Zhuang language. Furthermore, students worry that they might be relegated to a life of employment in Zhuang areas and not be selected for work in the more economically booming Han areas both in and outside Guangxi. At the present, socio-economic reality means that the Zhuang people must master Chinese, if they want to look for jobs in the cities. If Zhuang children want to go on to higher education, they must master Chinese too. In fact, the measurement of their intellectual level depends largely on the level of their Chinese.

The Han language is the only language for the Zhuang to interact with the Han and even with Zhuang in different dialect areas. As it is said, you don’t need to worry wherever you might be in China if you have mastered the Han, i.e., Mandarin language, just as you don’t need to worry wherever you are in the world, if you can speak and read the a-b-c’s of English. Han/Mandarin language is the main language target for the Zhuang. They want and need to learn to learn it for survival.

5 Conclusion

As was discussed before, the Zhuang culture has been influenced by Han culture for over 2,000 years of contact with the Han who entered the Zhuang region of Lingnan. The Zhuang people have had to give up their language and learn the language of the Han imperial rulers not only because of external causes but also because of internal reasons. The imperial government promoted “Sinification.” This is the first and foremost reason. Almost everything

relates to this reason that the Zhuang have adopted Han culture and language and have assimilated to the Han and can be linked to the policy of Sinification.

Minority languages and writing systems in China or in East and Southeast Asia face the same challenges as lesser languages everywhere. They are clearly endangered species. In the age of globalization, there are powerful economic incentives to cast aside local languages. It is clearly possible for an endangered language to vanish in 1-2 generations, swallowed up in the language and culture of a dominant ethnolinguistic majority, such as Chinese or English. In any society in any part of the world, minority languages and scripts can only be kept alive if there is strong leadership from minority leaders and support and encouragement from central governments to keep them from dying - and with them the treasure of indigenous knowledge that they preserve.

Notes

1. Data from the Fourth survey of Chinese Population. 1993.
2. Unpublished survey. Chinese Nationalities Affairs Committee.
3. Huang, Pingwen, 2001. "Different Cultural Contacts and Language Change: A Study of Zhuang Language Change." Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation. Central University for Nationalities, Beijing, PCR.
4. Today, this region is roughly equivalent to Guangdong and Guangxi provinces.
5. The Chinese custom is to refer to dates of historical importance in terms of who the ruler was at the time or some other naming custom. That is to say, unlike in the West, events were recorded not with dates but with names of persons, periods, events or dynasties, e.g., "Warring States" (481-221 B.C.); "Spring and Autumn" (722-481 B.C.). In this case, the year 1330 A.D. was the year when Emperor Sun of the Yuan dynasty was in power. Also, when a census was conducted, only houses were counted, not individuals who lived in them.
6. The history of the system of demotic Zhuang character writing is similar to the development of the Vietnamese *chu nom*.
7. 1. I come to talk about good things. I come to talk about ancient dynasties. 2. Of one thousand years ago, I come to talk in detail. Of ten thousand years ago, I come to talk.
8. "Yi" referred to all of the minority groups in eastern China; "Man" – often translated as "Barbarians" – referred to the minority groups in southern China.
9. These are the indigenous people of southern China, i.e., non-Han. They were the ancestors of the Zhuang (Tai) and most likely included peoples of Austroasiatic stock as well as Tai.
10. Fan Qixu and Qin Naichang. *Zhuang Encyclopedia*. Nanning: Guangxi Ethnic Minority Press. p.233 [in Chinese]
11. This is a Chinese euphemism for the Cultural Revolution and is also called "The Dark Period."
12. Kaup, Katherine P. 2000. *Creating the Zhuang - Ethnic Politics in China*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers. p.138.
13. Furthermore, in the Tai language family tree, which traditionally has three main branches, Northern Zhuang is listed as a Northern Tai language, while Southern Zhuang is listed as a Central Tai language.
14. Up until quite recently, Chinese publications in English on minority groups in China refer to them as "nationalities." Some newer publications are beginning to use the term "ethnic group" in place of "nationality."
15. By "social productions" is meant achievements of all kinds: in the arts, sciences, and technology.

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