

The status of research on Kam-Tai studies by Chinese scholars

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The speakers of Kam-Tai languages in China include the Zhuang, Bouyei, Dai, Kam (Dong), Sui, Maonan, Mulao and Li peoples. Their total population in the P.R. China exceeds 23.7 million, which is about one-third of the population of all the ethnic minorities in the country. The Kam-Tai group of language also include the Gelao language spoken mainly in Guizhou, the Lakkja vernacular in Jinxiu county, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, the Lin'gao (Ongbei) and Cun vernaculars on Hainan Island.

Kam-Tai studies have a long history. Peoples speaking Kam-Tai languages can trace their ancestry back to the ancient Baiyue groups. Starting from the Spring-Autumn period and Warring-States period in Chinese history, the activities of these groups have been continuously mentioned in historical records. Modern research started in the 30's and 40's of the present century. Although working under very difficult conditions, a group of historians, ethnologists, and linguists did outstanding pioneering work in Kam-Tai studies then. Li Fanggui investigated the languages of Zhuang in Guangxi, Kam, Sui, Yanghuang and Mak in Guizhou, Zhuang and Dai in Yunnan. Works by Tao Yunkui, Fang Guoyu, Li Fuyi, Jiang Yingliang, Yao Hesheng, Yan Deyi, Zhang Jingqiu dealt with the history and culture of Dai in Yunnan. Luo Changpei and Xing Gongwan researched the language and writings of Dai, and the language of the Kam. Liu Xian and Wang Xingrui studied the Li in Hainan, Cen Jiawu the Sui and Bouyei in Guizhou. Xu Shongshi researched the Zhuang and all the Kam-Tai groups. And Ding Xiao, Rui Yifu and Luo Xianglin made many verifications on the ancient Liao and Baiyue people. The scholars mentioned above were generally considered as precursors in this field because of their outstanding and pioneering contributions under the very poor conditions at that time. At the beginning of 1950s I got to understand the Dai people in Xishuangbanna through a book written by Tao Yunkui, the Circle of the Dai's life in Cheli, and learned and mastered Dai literacy with the help of a book by Luo Changpei and Xing Qinglan (Xing Gongwan). First Exploration of Language and Writing of Baiyi (Dai) in Lianshan.

After the new China was founded, with the development of the nation wide works on ethnic groups in a large scope, the investigations on the Kam-Tai groups entered a new era. During the early period from 1952 to 1954, the central government successively sent four visiting missions for ethnic groups and two commissions on ethnic groups, both consisting of scholars and professional persons,

out to the Northwest, Southwest, Middle South, Northeast and Inner-Mongolia to inspect the work on ethnic groups. Prof. Fei Xiaotong wrote *Paternal Nationalities* in Guizhou on the basis of his experience with the Bouyei people. In 1956 the Great Nationwide Investigation of the societies and histories of Minority Nationalities began to launch and eight commissions were sent out to eight provinces to carry out the work. In 1958 the commissions were added to 16 ones, amounting to 1000 members and the Great Investigation continued to 1964. Meanwhile seven commissions on the languages of Minority Nationalities consisting of 700 members were formed and sent to 15 provinces to investigate the situations of the languages of 42 ethnic groups. The results of the investigation were five kinds of series of books, which were a brief history for each nationality, a brief introduction to its language, a general survey of local situations, collections of investigatory materials on its society and history (volumes unlimited), and *Minority Nationalities in China*, a big work to introduce the general situations of each Minority. Take the Dai people in Yunnan as an example, besides special chapter in *Minority Nationalities in China* for the Dai, *Brief History of the Dai* (1 volume), *Brief Introduction to the Dai Language* (1 volume), *General Survey of Local Situations* (1 volume for each Dai autonomous prefecture and county relatively, totally 8 volumes), *Collections of Investigatory Materials on Dai Society and History* (22 volumes) were compiled. The *Five Kinds of Series of Books* were also compiled for the Zhuang, Bouyei, Kam, Sui, Li, Mulao, and Maonan, which laid a solid foundation for the research on the Kam-Tai groups and opened up a new prospect.

Since the beginning of 1980's the research on this domain has dug more profoundly and more thoroughly than before. The investigations before 1980 were carried out collectively and the work were also the collective results. After 1980, each scholar conducted his monographic study in his own realm, the theses and works released during this period were more profound and thorough, and covered a much wider scope than before, concerning with society and history, customs, literature and art, science and technology, astronomy and calendar, religion, law, education, and the development of economy. Take the field of history as example. Five volumes of *Collections on Baiyue History* compiled by the Research Association of Baiyue Ethnic Groups History were successively published. *History of Dai Literature*, of *Zhuang Literature*, of *Kam Literature*, of *Bouyei Literature*, and of *Li Literature* were compiled and published. *Cultural History of Minority Nationalities in China* published by the People's Press of Liaoning in 1994 contributed a special chapter to each nationality's cultural history including the Kam-Tai groups'. At present, the Educational history for each nationality has been compiled and are ready to be published.

In the field of history, the ethnical, historical relationship between the Kam-Tai groups in China and Thailand, Laos and Shan were mainly discussed. In 1980's,

several scholars from Institute of Southeast Asia Studies in Yunnan Province expounded their views that Nanzhao State was not a state founded by the ancient Thai people. In 1990s, the relationship between Zhuang and Thai has become a focal topic which reached its culmination when the First International Comparative Conference of Zhuang-Thai Traditional Cultures was conducted in Bangkok, Thailand in October, 1996. The Association of Zhuang Studies in Guangxi continues to work on this issue, Ethical Studies of Guangxi, a monthly journal sponsored by Institute of Ethnical Studies of Guangxi Autonomous Region, set up a special column, Zhuang Studies, from its first issue, and put forward a suggestion that the framework of the systematic theory of Zhuang Studies be built up. Discussions on this issue is going into a further depth. In addition, an association of Dai Studies was set up in Yuan and an Institute of Buddhism was also established in Xishuangbanna. An association of Bouyei Studies was founded in Guizhou, which has had four volumes of Bouyei Studies published. The Institute of Kam-Tai Studies in Central University for Nationalities was engaged in a comprehensive research on the Kam-Tai groups. The Institute has five books and an issue of special journal published and is carrying out series of research programs.

In the domain of Linguistics, a large number of research works on the Kam-Tai Languages and Minority-Chinese dictionaries have been published since 1980, such as Kam Language in Sanjiang by Xing Gongwan, Investigations of Li Language by Ouyang Jueya and Zheng Yiqing, Studies on Han-Sui Relative words by Zeng Xiaoyu, Comparative Studies on Kam-Han Grammar by Shi Lin, Studies on Zhuang Grammar by Wei Qingwen, Dai Grammar by Wu Lingyun and Yang Guangyuan, research on Yanghuang Language by Bo Wenzhe, Research on Bouyei Grammar by Yu Shichang (1956), Kam-Han Dictionary, Li- Han Dictionary, Bouyei-Han Dictionary, Han-Dai Dictionary, Ancient Zhuang Character Dictionary, etc. In addition, some comprehensive works on Kam-Tai were also published, such as An Introduction to Kam-Tai Languages by Ni Dabai, another by Liang Min and Zhang Junru, Vocabulary Collection of Kam-Tai Languages, Collection of Kam-Tai *Literatural Materials compiled and published successively* by the Institute of Kam-Tai Studies.

In the research field of Kam-Tai Languages, one of the most total questions is that which family the Kam-Tai groups belongs to. According to the traditional view put forward by Li Fanggui, Luo Changpei and Fu Maoji etc, it, as *Tibeto-Burman* and *Miao-Yao*, belongs to the Sino-Tibetan family. This view is accepted by a majority of scholars in China. And the entries relative to this question in the Languages and Writings volume and Nationalities volume in China's Great Encyclopedia also accept the view raised by Paul K. Benedict, who believes genetically Kam-Tai Languages are more closely relative to *Malayo-Polynesian family*, and, as a result of long language contact, typologically are similar to Chinese

and Tibeto-Burman. In another word, the proto Kam-Tai was a polysyllabic word language without tone, but it gradually changed into a monosyllabic word, tone language because of long language contact. Prof. Ni Dabai found a sample from Huihui Language in Hainan that an agglutinative language has changed into an isolating language. Luo Meizhen believes the ancestors of Kam-Tai groups were Malay race. Influenced by the speakers of Sino-Tibetan, they later abandoned their origin first language and used Proto Sino-Tibetan as their mother tongue. When the proto Sino-Tibetan split up, the Kam-Tai Languages developed into individual languages, which still belong to the Sino-Tibetan phylum. Influenced by French scholar Laurent Sagart, Prof. Xing Gongwan has given up his original view and advances the hypothesis of Sino-Tibetan, Austro-Tai phylum. The opinions on the question which phylum the Kam-Tai belongs to are so different that it is impossible to make them congruent at present.

In 1951, I attended Central Institute of Nationalities (now renamed as Central University for Nationalities). At beginning, I learned Bouyei. A year later I finished my courses and began to compile Dai Textbooks with a Dai teacher and assisted the Dai teacher to teach the first Han students Dai language. Later I led the students to Xishuangbanna to practice Dai language, where I successively took part in the Anti-illiteracy Campaign, the investigation of the Dai society and history. From then on a firm tie linking my life to the Dai people was formed. Generally, I integrate my interest in learning the Dai Language with my concerns with the Dai society, with my deep affection for the Dai people. Therefore, when studying the Dai, I always view it as a whole. I have researched not only their language, writing and ancient boods but also their society, history, laws, astronomy, calendar, literature, arts, religion, and philosophy.

Because I mainly teach language (also linguistic theories) as my job, I link the research on language with the research on history and culture together. Gradually, I generalize the theory and method of Cultural Linguistics from my practice in the research on Minority Languages in China. Based on historical comparative research and structural analysis, I'm trying to introduce Chaos Theory and its method that have developed for nearly 20 years into the domain of Linguistic research in order to successfully analyse many non-linear phenomena in the course of Language development. Linguists in the past viewed a language only as a linear system, with their focus of attention on its equilibrium and periodicity happening in its evolution. Historical linguists probed its laws of phonetic correspondence while structuralists concentrated their attention on its distribution and oppositions. In fact, language is not a self-closed world of signs but an open-ended, evolutionary and complex system containing plenty of interfering factors from outside. This system is not a deterministic, simple and harmonious model, and any negligible non-deterministic factor with itself or any inconsiderable interfering factor from outside often results in

large and unpredictable change. So, in order to get a comprehensive understanding of language, it is a practical and ideal way to use Chaos theory and its method as our guide.

To view and research the object (language) as a whole, Chaos Theory provides us with a bright prospect to analyze language from the view of culture. We are sure to find something new, more vivid and much closer to the reality in the language system if we apply the method of Chaos theory to study the “bifurcation,” “rises and ebbs” and “internal random” in language evolution, to study “the graduational similarity” of cultural entirety to its language, to study “the equilibrium break” in language system, the impact of “the strange attractors” on the free state phenomena, and the sensitive dependence of the posterity language on the initial conditions of its parent language. By the method of non-linear analysis, we can dig out the quality of culture and the value of language, which would make it possible for us to reconstruct the whole form of the nationality’s culture, so we are certain to get a higher social value in linguistics.

Let’s take the issue to which phylum the Kam-Tai belongs to illustrate the method. The key point of the issue is what “proto language” the Kam-Tai Language came from. Some believe they came from proto Malay; others, from proto Sino-Tibetan. It is clear that theoretical basis of both sides is A. Schleicher’s Language family theory, namely, they believe the related languages of today were split up from a proto language. But if we investigate all the languages in the world as a whole from the point of the Chaos theory, we will find a notable, self-contradictory fact that the amount of languages in the world decreased continually from ancient times to today. It is said that the amount of languages in the world before the Christian era was 150,000. 70,000 or 80,000 languages were left in the Middle Ages, and only 6,000 were left at the beginning of this century. Linguists pessimistically predict there will exist only 600 languages in the world in another hundred years. According to the Family Tree Theory, the related languages of today were split up from a proto language. In another word, a proto language has changed into many related language of today, so the amount of languages in the world, like the population of people, should continually increase. The fact is that the development of language is a self-contradictory motion, in which the integration of languages and split of languages happen at the same time and the former is often stronger than the latter. A. Schleicher fixed his eyes on the split. He also taught us to do so. Now it’s time for us to turn our eyes away from the split to the integration.

If we study the phylum issue from the view of Chaos theory, we will find that neither the Kam-Tai languages nor the languages of other families in the Sino-Tibetan are descendant languages developing from a proto language. Any language of today has been mixed many times within its family or from other families in the

course of development. Therefore, using the concept of human clan indiscriminately to express the linguistic classification was A.Schleicher's "Evolutional Prejudice" which cannot explain the complex phenomena of the society and culture in languages.

Any language, as a multi-dimensional open system, is a *lingua franca*, so its kinship cannot be an entirely pure one but a practical and relative concept which is far different from the biological one. If we assume there is a relative starting point, to be a general structure of a phylum, this relative starting point cannot be used to explain the situations of the languages involved before itself but to explain the facts of the extant languages. The starting point is the assumed "proto-language." It is also called the initial conditions of the languages involved in the phylum in the terms of the chaos theory.

One of the most important concepts in the Chaos theory is "the sensitive dependence on the initial conditions," that is, any inconsiderable change of the initial conditions in the linguistic system would be continually expanded, which must result in such large deviation that its distance becomes farther and farther away from the phase space. On the basis of the materials from existing language, we suppose a certain language to be initial conditions in the light of the concept above. Any negligible interference from nature, surrounding, society, and culture can cause the course of development to deviate a little, and after a long time, the proto language is certain to split up into two languages that have little similarity to each other. But no matter how far is the distance between the two courses of development, they will depend sensitively on the initial conditions, namely, their performance patterns still remain the original genes of the initial conditions, which show themselves not as external states but perform patterns. Again, let's take the Kam-Tai languages as example. The performance patterns of the Kam-Tai languages include syllabic structure, word combination, collocation, components of sentence parts, and the expression patterns in phrases. As the linguistic characteristics, the course of evolution and development of the Kam-Tai languages are nearly the same as most of the Sino-Tibetan languages, it is reasonable to classify the Kam-Tai into the Sino-Tibetan.

Prof. Benedict puts the initial conditions back to the past further and further according to the limited materials at his hand and puts forward the hypotheses of proto Austro-Thai phylum which has been modified several times. Factually, the initial conditions can be put back to the time when the human being began to appear in the world and shared the only common language in the light of the monism theory of mankind origin, but this has no significance at all to linguistics or to the explanation to diversity of existing languages. So when we conduct comparative research on the Sino-Tibetan languages, we must assume a provincing time limit for

the initial conditions of the proto Sino-Tibetan. The time limit should be in the period of “the pre-remote ages sounds” as Prof. Xing Gongwan put out, that is, several hundred or even 2000 years (Xia Dynasty) before Qin or Han Dynasty (around 800-2200 B.C). During that period there did not exist the common proto Sino-Tibetan language, but many languages that interchanged, merged each other, split up, or co-existed. Those languages generated some origin genes which were inherited by their posterity languages in the course of interchanging, merging each other and splitting. These origin genes, as the initial conditions, decided the directions in which the posterity languages developed. The archaeological research in the past 20 years has attested the fact that the civilization of Xia Dynasty, the civilization of Shang Dynasty and that of Zhou Dynasty were not a continuous entity, but “the ones developing from different regions” and “from different ethnic groups,” and that “besides Xia, Shang and Zhou there still lived many other different states.” It is obvious that period was a period when many languages were mixed together. So it is impossible to find out an entirely pure proto Sino-Tibetan language from those ancient languages. Proto Sino-Tibetan language is not an entity but a symbol, a common denominator got through the reconstruction of historical linguistics, which is helpful for us to explain some phenomena of today’s languages. We know there exist many correspondent words between Chinese and the Kam-Tai languages. It is neither significant nor practical to discuss or identify whether the correspondent words are cognates or loanwords because cognates might be loanwords and loanwords might be cognates under such backgrounds. If we do not hold the view of the chaos theory, it will be very difficult to solve the problem to which phylum the Kam-Tai languages belong, even impossible to have a deterministic concept of the Sino-Tibetan phylum.

In the course of its formation and development, the proto Sino-Tibetan language must have contacted and interchanged with some other proto languages whose posterity languages have little close relationship with the Sino-Tibetan languages of today. So the Sino-Tibetan languages of today are certain to contain many component parts from languages of Altaic, Malayo-Polynesian, Austro-Asiatic, Indo-European and Dravidian, but these component parts found no way into the genes store of Sino-Tibetan, so they could not change the basic course of the evolution of the Sino-Tibetan. Thus it has no practical linguistic significance to argue whether the Kam-Tai languages have genetic relationship with these languages.

The discussion above is a concrete macro example that we use the chaos theory to guide our research on Kam-Tai languages. It can also be applied to guide us to make some analysis on vocabulary, phonetics and grammar we will deal with it some time in the future.

