

# 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.<sup>1</sup>

The autononyms of the Zhuang vary from place to place. They are variously called Bouxcuengh, Bouxyaex, Bouxnoengz, Bouxdoj, Bouxmbanj, Bouxraeuz, Bouxrung, 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%.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup>

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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.

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.”<sup>4</sup> 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.

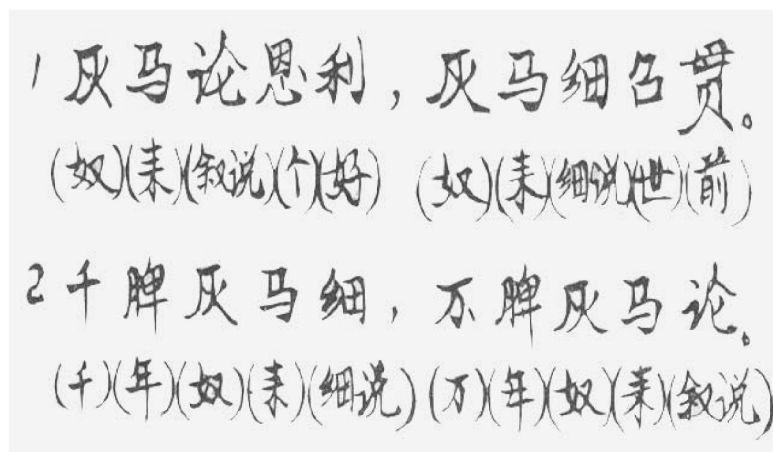
Sinification issues historically have involved: 1) forcing vast numbers of Han Chinese to migrate and mix with minority groups so as to allow the Han culture natural penetration; 2) encouraging Han Chinese to marry with minority peoples so as to let Chinese culture penetrate local family structures; 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 ocured 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 the13 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.)<sup>5</sup> 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).<sup>6</sup>



**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 Text<sup>7</sup>**

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”<sup>8</sup> 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 Yue<sup>9</sup> 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.