

The Lingao people and Hui'an people – A mysterious relationship

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The Lingao people are a small ethnic group that can be found mainly in Lingao County as well as in the suburbs of Haikou in the province of Hainan in the People's Republic of China. Lingao County is situated in the very north of Hainan island, and thus it is no surprise, that it is assumed that the Lingao are originally from Fujian, as people in Lingao state themselves. According to Lingao inhabitants they speak a deformed variety of Hakka dialect that they see "as a bad way of speaking Chinese", however, in 2013 I already proposed that Lingao is a Tai language that originated from Fujian. Furthermore, I would go as far now to say that the next related language is Zhuang, but it does not fit in the sound pattern of Zhuang as both languages went their own way and therefore I suggested the 'Third Orthography' in 2016 which was not based on Zhuang, as my first and second try to find an orthography for this unwritten language was based on Zhuang and rather led to confusion. Lingao language has three dialects: Bohou, Lincang, and Jialai (see Schmitz, 2017).

In 2013, I published a paper on the Lingao people suggesting that they are relatives with the Hui'an people in Hui'an County in Quanzhou City in Fujian. However, my factual knowledge was much higher than my methodological knowledge, and thus, though the information in the paper might be very interesting, the paper itself fails all kind of scientific standards, as I was not enough acquainted with them back at that time, and therefore, I want to use this paper as a chance to elaborate my thoughts and present my thesis in a scientific paper, that fulfills the necessary standards and therefore can be accepted in the scientific community. Anyways, we are very happy about all the critiques which my paper received as it helped us to think further and to go further.

As a source for getting to know the Lingao, an online messenger was used to communicate with natives; for analysing the appearance of the Hui'an, photos of different sources were used which cannot be shown here however, for personal rights and copyright reasons.

I. The similarities of the Hui'an people with other ethnicities

A problem that we have with the Hui'an is that only one sex kept old traditions: the women, while the men of the Hui'an do not differ from Chinese at all. As I pointed out in my 2013 paper:

A traditional Hui'an woman covers her hair with colourful designed scarves and sometimes a hat, too. There are many different kinds of scarves and hats, and some women wear really small yellow hats while others wear a more wider orange hat. The scarves can be green, blue or red for example, and even have different coloured designs on it. They normally wear a dark blue or cyan kind of jacket which is very tight to the body, but interestingly these clothes don't seem to be strict or conservative as their jackets sometimes are really short and the bellies are totally uncovered.

The main thing that we could see here now are the different influences of Tai-Kadai people in their clothing. Especially the Dai people in Yunnan are renowned for their tight dresses, though they prefer to cover their bellies. Dai women also wear accessories in their hair, while Hui'an women might wear accessories on their hats.

When I saw some women belonging to the Maonan people on a photo, they were wearing thin blue hats which reminded me very much of one of the hats in a Hui'an picture. Although they don't seem to be as thin as the Maonan hats they were still very thin compared to the yellow brought hats [of the Jing].

Despite the dresses that seem to have an influence from Yunnan and probably also Southern Guizhou – though I am uncertain about the latter – and the thin hats as can be found by the Guangxi's Maonan people, the Hui'an have preserved a marriage custom which is fading away now, but that is very remarkable.

The grandmother takes care of the mother the whole life. She always looks after her girl to keep sure what she's doing and same does the mother with her daughter. She keeps sure that her daughter won't go out with other men. Therefore the women are always observed by their mothers. The marriage ceremony is very interesting. The bride is brought to the groom and in front of his house they pray for safety. Then after the groom took off her red scarf covering her face by not even really touching her, she can go to the bridal chamber. But both are not allowed to spend the night together,

and there are some measures to avoid any physical contact between bride and groom. The bride won't stay alone in the bridal chamber the whole marriage night, but is accompanied by a neighbor, while the groom stays at a friend's house (Qiu & Lu, without year). The next coming five days, the bride has to obtain different marriage costumes in the groom's house and then she goes back to her mother's house. From then on, there is at first no more contact between groom and bride and when both see each other somewhere in public places they won't even talk to each other. Only very few times in a year, they are allowed to meet and this goes on until she becomes pregnant (China Culture, 2006). During the few times they sleep together they are not allowed to speak any word.

I assumed that this tradition was conducted, since the parents always chose the marriage partners, and to avoid that they can easily divorce or run away, it would have been a shame for the people to split up, if a baby was in their life, keeping them together. In addition, the children always had to help their parents with the work, and therefore, they also probably stayed in their families for so long to be able to continue supporting them. People belonging to the Zhuang ethnicity told me that this custom was actually practiced in their society too, but faded away long ago. Hays (2008a) points out that “Both men and women are the labor force of the family, but only men have the right to inherit the family property”, which would emphasize my claim. Hays (2008a) also writes that “the wife stays away from the husband's home after marriage. At the wedding, the bride is taken to the bridegroom's home by a dozen girls of the same age. She returns to live with her parents the next day and visits her husband only occasionally during holidays or the busy farming seasons. The woman move permanently to the man's home two or three years later or after having a child”. This almost exactly equals the Hui'an tradition. The custom could not only be found by the Zhuang in Guangxi, but also by the Buyi in Guizhou as “in the past, [the] bride didn't move to her husband's home until after one or two years' living in her mother's home” (Hays 2008b). In fact, the Zhuang and Buyi are more or less one ethnic group, who call themselves “Bouxrauz” (Schmitz, 2017). It can also be observed here that the Hui'an must have a link to the Zhuang, as this marriage custom seemingly is very Tai and often labeled as “unique” in Chinese media.

However, the Hui'an have lost their language and speak a Minnan dialect now, and most of their heritage seems lost. An interesting fact is that the Tai people went southwards, so to say they went from China to Laos and Thailand; however as I already observed in 2013, they have a lot of things in common with people from Yunnan and Guangxi, and it might be possible that for whatever reason, they might be 'returners'

who went back northwards. However, this is just an idea, and there is no proof for it, especially since it is difficult to trace the Hui'an back and put them in a certain time.

II. In search for the Lingao people's origin through their language

When analyzing the Lingao people, one should focus on their language, which is very close to Zhuang in many aspects, but also has a few features from Gelao, Li and Yunnan's Tai languages, though this is just an indicator that Lingao is a Tai language and shares common Tai vocabulary and not an indicator that Lingao itself is from Yunnan or elsewhere. The word for 'tongue' for instance is [In], not only in Lingao, but also "in many Tai languages of Thailand, Laos and southern China, also in Yunnan's Buyang language and Laos' Lao language" (Schmitz, 2013).

Zhuang and Lingao have a lot of similarities, as can be seen in the following chart, adopted from Schmitz, 2017. The first word is in Zhuang, the second in Lingao. Please note that the words were changed into the 'Third Orthography' here in the paper, while in the book they are still in the second orthography.

vah – vah, vo (话, 语)

har – ha (啦)

gwn – gan (吃)

dwg – di (是)

guek – guk (国)

sam – tamm (三)

haj, ngu – ngu (五)

biz, na – na (胖)

byom, bang – viang (瘦)

roeg – nok (鸟)

linx – linn (舌头)

raemx, naemx – namm (水)

hwn, fwn, paenz – funn* (雨)

** often pronounced like ‘hun’*

It also pointed out three similarities with other Tai-Kadai languages, the Lingao section is again translated into ‘Third Orthography’ here:

Rongjiang County Dong: jau (Long & Zheng, 1998)

Lingao: hau

Chinese: 我

Buyang: ma nuk (see Sagart)

Lingao: nok

Chinese: 鸟

Buyang: nga (see Sagart)

Lingao: ngiah

Chinese: 蛇

Even further, the question is, where the Tai-Kadai languages might originate from. Lee & Clontz (2012: 28) point out that “As early as in 1901 Schlegel maintains that Malay and Siamese/Thai are genetically related to one another, confirming the Austro–Tai hypothesis. [...] However, after examining reconstructions in subgroups of Tai–Kadai, Thurgood (1994) denied a genetic relationship between Tai-Kadai and Austronesian but claims a relationship of loan words from language contact”. However, there are also arguments that speak for a later migration from the Philippines or Taiwan to Hainan (ibid.). This could lead to the idea that Lingao might be an early Tai language that preserved older words than Zhuang. However, this idea can be easily rejected as the Lingao trace themselves back to Fujian and until now there is no evidence that the Lingao ever had any linguistic contact to Taiwan or the Philippines. However, some scholars – especially Chinese historians – claim that the home of the Tai-Kadai languages is actually on Hainan (Lee & Clontz, 2012: 33f.). Edmondson (without year: 9) states the Li (Hlai) went off to Hainan from Guangxi after the Tang Dynasty. Edmondson also argues that Fujian could have been multiethnic 2,000 years ago being the home to several ethnic minorities. Gedney links the Tai languages to the “Kam-Sui languages of Guizhou as well as several languages of Hainan (i.e. Lingao/Be and Li/Hlai)” (Johnson & Wang, 2010: 8). Johnson & Wang (2010:8) emphasize that “Within China, speakers of almost all Central Taic languages have been grouped into the official Zhuang nationality since the late 1950s, together with those Northern Taic speakers residing in Yunnan, Guangxi, Guangdong and Hainan provinces.” However I want to point out that the Zhuang in Hainan make up only a very small part of the population, and therefore it is very unlikely that the connection between Zhuang and Lingao came through direct language contact on Hainan.

Even further, already Hansell pointed out that Lingao stands in a relation with Tai in 1988, however, he rejected that it is close enough to Proto-Tai and therefore suggests a common ancestor (Thongkum, 1992). I suggest that this common ethnicity might be Hui’an in Fujian or another ethnic group from Southern Fujian which might be distinct now. We can only hypothesize about how the Lingao arrived on Hainan, but the most possible explanation is that a few boats who went out for fishing got lost on the sea and were driven southwards straight to Hainan. This might be an explanation, why both, the Hui’an and the Lingao live at the seacoast. Even further, the Lingao live from fishing and farming. It is difficult to trace an own traditional background to the Lingao. Their contemporary understanding of morality and ethics is rather Chinese conservatism brought by the Communist Party of China, as Hainan has always been a peasant’s stronghold of Communism, even long before 1949 (cp. Feng & Goodman, 1997: 54). It is difficult to say whether this conservatism was always present on Hainan, but I suggested that Hainan was probably more liberal than their home in Fujian and therefore the Lingao intermarried with local Chinese people,

rather adopting their costumes. As a result of the lost men in Hui'an, the local women intermarried with Chinese men, but insisted on keeping their costumes. This would be a possible explanation to explain the loss of male traditions in Hui'an County, and at the same time, why Lingao people came from Fujian. However, this is only one hypothesis which is difficult to prove. However, an important argument for that is the self-identification of one's ancestors to Fujian, and the missing connection to Proto-Tai. In the future it should be researched how close the Lingao are to the Maonan, Buyang and Gelao, as well as to the Southern Dong as this might help us to see whether there might have been a 'returner' movement back to Guizhou as well as to find out the distance between the settlement of the Hui'an in Fujian and the Lingao on Hainan. This might solve, whether there is a certain connection among them.

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