A Sociolinguistic Introduction to the Central Taic Languages of Wenshan Prefecture, China

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Abstract

Wenshan Zhuang and Miao Autonomous Prefecture in China’s Yunnan province is home to over a
million members of the official Zhuang nationality. Over half of these speak language varieties classified
into the central branch of Tai languages. Though many of the languages of the southwestern branch of Tai
(which includes Thai and Lao) have been extensively studied by Thai and other linguists, and the northern
branch (which includes the government designated standard varieties for both the Zhuang and Bouyei
nationalities) are the subject of numerous works by Chinese linguists, relatively few works focused on
Central Tai languages are available. The aim of this work is to provide sociolinguistic data from the
several Central Tai Zhuang languages of Wenshan prefecture, resulting from sociolinguistic field
research conducted from 2005 to 2007.
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1 Introduction

The Zhuang people are the largest minority nationality within the People’s Republic of China, numbered at a population of 16 million during the 2000 national census (National Bureau of Statistics 2003). Of these, approximately one-third speak "Southern Zhuang" dialects, that is, Central Taic varieties, whereas two-thirds speak "Northern Zhuang", or Northern Taic varieties. Over 1.1 million Zhuang nationality people live in Yunnan Province, and more than half of these are speakers of Central Taic language varieties.

Though the Tai family as a whole has been the subject of a significant amount of research in Thailand, China, and elsewhere during the past century, much remains to be done. Before his death in 1987, the great Chinese-American linguist Li Fang-kuei wrote:

The Need for a Linguistic Survey: There are important areas where we lack information about the Tai languages. Some regions are not readily accessible to us for investigation, but eventually we shall need good descriptions of many key languages and dialects. There are, of course, increasing numbers of current publications about these languages and dialects, but still more will be necessary.

The study of Tai languages has been in the past more or less oriented from the point of view of Siamese, the standard language of Thailand. Very often the Tai languages in China have been considered as aberrant languages or dialects and still very little is known about them, in spite of some good, recent publications. The study of Tai languages as a whole must put the linguistic material from China on the same level as the Siamese, Lao, or Shan language (Li 1992).

Li would be glad to see how much new research (and older, previously unpublished research) on the Chinese Taic languages has been published in the past two decades; however, there remains a need to supplement our knowledge of the Tai family with additional data from less studied languages. The Central Taic languages of Yunnan remain some of the least researched languages of the Tai family, and thus the current work endeavors to bring to print some preliminary data on these languages.

The research data presented here is the fruit of a collaborative research project jointly conducted by the Wenshan Zhuang and Miao Autonomous Prefecture’s Zhuang Studies Association and Minority Affairs Commission and SIL International’s East Asia Group. The research was carried out at a number of locations within Yunnan Province’s Wenshan Zhuang and Miao Autonomous Prefecture from 2005 to 2007. The primary researchers were Mingfu Wang, an ethnographer with the Wenshan Prefecture Zhuang Studies Association (and a first language speaker of Nong Zhuang) and Minority Affairs Commission and Eric and Susanne Johnson, linguists with SIL International’s East Asia Group. The initial research objectives were:
1. Determine the feasibility of using Nong Zhuang1 (Yan-Guang Southern Zhuang) as a reference dialect to meet the language dialect needs of all Wenshan Central Tai (Southern Zhuang) speakers (both those called Bu Dai/Tu and those called Phu Nong).2

2. Understand the village vitality level of the two Yunnan Southern Zhuang languages (dialects), the interest of the speakers of Southern Zhuang in Yunnan in Zhuang language development (such as adult literacy, bilingual education and print and non-print media in Zhuang) and viability of further Southern Zhuang language development work.

In order to accomplish these objectives, several instruments were used: sociolinguistic questionnaires, observation, recorded text testing (RTT), and wordlist elicitation. The following sections on language use and vitality and dialect intelligibility will rely upon the data elicited through these instruments to attempt to achieve the above objectives and answer the primary research question: Which Wenshan Central Taic (Southern Zhuang) dialect(s) should be the basis for further language development efforts, in order that resources can be most efficiently used to serve the greatest number of those needing resources through the spoken and written forms of their own language? (The wordlist data collected in the course of this survey will be analyzed in a separate paper, Johnson 2010, forthcoming.)

1.1 The Taic Languages

The Tai3 group of languages stretches from northeast India in the west, down into Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and up through the provinces of Yunnan, Guangxi, Guizhou and Guangdong in China, with a few villages on Hainan Island. There are over 80 million speakers of Tai languages (Li and Solnit 2002), the largest language in terms of speakers being that of the Thai language of central Thailand. Within China most members of the Zhuang, Dai and Bouyei nationality groups speak Tai languages.

The higher level classification of the Tai languages remains a subject for study with several differing theories proposed. The traditional view going all the way back to Lacouperie (1886), the first linguist to identify the Tai languages as a distinct group, is that the Tai languages are somehow related to the Sino-Tibetan family. This was originally the view of the great Chinese-American linguist Fang Kuei Li, who published his reconstruction of Proto-Tai in 1977,4 and remains the most common view within Chinese linguistic circles today, with scholars such as Luo Meizhen (1992) arguing this position based on large numbers of cognate words in core vocabulary and seemingly similar tonal development. In 1942, Paul Benedict shook up the conventional wisdom by proposing that Tai is related to Austronesian languages, such as Indonesian rather than Chinese, as well as a set of other languages of southern China which he grouped together under the name “Kadai.” While the grouping of Tai with Kadai has been fairly well accepted, the linking with Indonesian has had mixed acceptance. Some linguists have been persuaded by

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1 Nong Zhuang was chosen as the proposed standard for the Wenshan Central Tai languages because: 1) it has already been used as a de facto standard by Wenshan Prefecture public radio broadcasting, 2) it is by far the largest in terms of population of speakers.
2 At the time of designing the research project and formulating these objectives, we were not yet aware of the existence of the Min Zhuang.
3 Because the aspirated form, “Thai,” is generally understood as a name for the languages or people of the nation of Thailand, the unaspirated form, “Tai,” is generally preferred for the language group, though this can result in confusion with those Southwestern Tai languages and people officially designated as the Dai nationality within China, as the “d” in Chinese Pinyin Romanization represents an unaspirated, unvoiced alveolar plosive. For the purposes of this work “Tai” represents the group or family of languages as a whole, whereas “Dai” represents the official nationality in China and “Dai Zhuang” represents the Central Tai language spoken in western Wenshan prefecture, known to Chinese linguists as “Wen-Ma Southern Zhuang.”
4 Although in the Encyclopedia Britannica article attributed to Li and David Solnit (2002), the Tai languages are referred to as a “closely related family of languages,” they do not seem to be using this term to exclude the possibility of a historical relationship to a larger family.
Benedict’s large numbers of apparently similar words and have even gone on to link other groups to this
“Austro-T(h)ai” family, such as Hmong-Mien and Japanese. Others, however, such as Gedney (1977)
remain unconvinced, citing Benedict’s departures from the established historical comparative method.
Gedney felt that while the Tai languages could be confidently linked to the Kam-Sui languages of
Guizhou as well as several languages of Hainan (i.e. Lingao/Be and Li/Hlai) within the traditionally
accepted procedures for comparative method classification, there was inadequate evidence for a higher
level classification. Li and Solnit’s Encyclopedia Britannica article on the Tai languages summarizes the
relationship of Tai to other families as follows:

It was formerly assumed that Tai and its relatives belonged to the Sino-Tibetan family
because of similar phonological systems (especially tone) and many lexical items shared
with Chinese. But many more lexical items are unrelated to Chinese and, since these
include the preponderance of the most basic vocabulary, a Sino-Tibetan affiliation is not
tenable. A competing proposal links Tai and its relatives with Austronesian, but this
connection has not yet been established to the satisfaction of most scholars. (Li and Solnit
2004)

Regardless of one’s views on higher level classifications, it is widely accepted that the Tai languages are
historically related to the Kam (Dong), Sui (Dong), Bê (Lingao), Hlai (Li) and probably also a group of
smaller, less well studied languages known as the Yang-Biao or Ge-Yang (Li Jinfang 1997) group, a
group including a number of small languages in Guangxi, Yunnan and northern Vietnam such as Gelao,
Laqua (Pubiao), Laji (Lachi), Buyang, etc. These languages together have been known as the Kam-Tai or
Tai-Kadai or simply Kadai family of languages. Some like Gordon (2005) see Kam-Tai as encompassing
Kam-Sui and Be-Tai, as well as a few outliers like Lakkia, but as a subset of Tai-Kadai which also
includes the Yang-Biao (Ge-Yang) group; thus Gordon’s classification of Southern Zhuang: Tai-Kadai,
Kam-Tai, Be-Tai, Tai-Sek, Tai, Central.

Within the Tai “family,” division has been a bit less controversial. As early as 1959, Li proposed a three
way division into Southwestern, Central and Northern Taic branches (Li 1959, 1960). While there has
been debate as to whether these three divisions should be considered to be of equal time depth with some
arguing for a more recent split between Southwestern and Central than between these with Northern Taic
and others arguing for a more recent split between Northern and Central than the split with Southwestern,
for practical purposes these three categories have proven to be useful for recognizing phonological and
lexical similarities and differences. The historical question is, of course, clouded by the complicated
contact situations the speakers of these languages have found themselves in through most of linguistic
history. Most of the Southwestern Tai languages have been heavily influenced by the languages of
Buddhism, Pali and Sanskrit, and show extensive borrowing in certain domains as a result, as well as use
of Pali-based scripts (Zhou and Luo 1999:326ff.). The Northern Taic languages have been in contact with
Chinese languages for millennia, as have most of the Central Taic languages, though some of these have
been in contact with Vietnamese as well. (Northern and Central Taic cultures were not significantly
affected by Theravada Buddhism, and therefore do not use Pali-based writing systems.) Some Northern
and Central Taic speakers are in daily contact with each other (e.g. in Guangan and Funing counties in
Yunnan province, and along the Zuojiang/Yong River in southwestern Guangxi) and, of, course many of
these languages are also in contact with various Tibeto-Burman, Hmong-Mien and Mon-Khmer
languages as well. (For a fuller discussion of classification issues, see Luo 1997 and Edmondson and
Solnit 1997.)

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. The Northern Taic speakers in Guizhou were assigned to a separate
Bouyei nationality, while Southwestern Taic speakers form the Dai nationality. In Chinese works, the Central Taic languages are known as “the Southern dialect of Zhuang”5 whereas those Northern Taic languages whose speakers are classified as Zhuang are known as “the Northern dialect of Zhuang.”

There are several salient phonetic differences between “Southern Zhuang,” that is, Central Taic languages and those now called “Northern Zhuang” and “Bouyei” (Northern Taic). Southern Zhuang varieties have retained a contrast between aspirated and unaspirated stops whereas Northern Zhuang and Bouyei have merged these.6 Southern Zhuang has also retained a variety of oral or nasal stop plus liquid consonant clusters, whereas Northern Zhuang and Bouyei lost these pre-liquid stops (thus these Proto-Taic clusters are usually pronounced as an "r-like" sound such as [ɣ] in Northern Taic languages). In addition to these phonological innovations, there are also certain cognate lexemes which are found in two of the branches, but appear to be lost in the third.

However, we should be careful not to make too much of the division among these three geographical branches, as this division was based primarily upon phonological and lexical features. As Li himself admitted “no attempt is made to deal with morphology or syntax.” (1977:xv) Li points out that though Southwestern and Central Taic languages often seem more similar to each other phonologically than they do to Northern Taic languages, in the limited syntax he did study, his Central Taic representative, Lungchow (Longzhou), seemed more similar to his Northern Taic representative, Po-ai (Bo’ai), than either was with his Southwestern Taic representative, Siamese (Central Thai) (1977: xvi). Edmondson (1994:164) identifies several historical patterns of phonological change which seem to have moved across both Southern and Northern Zhuang dialects, leading him to conclude that “a north-south division is a too simplified picture of Zhuang linguistic history.” Li also observed that certain languages in regions bordering another Taic branch show lexical forms not typically shown by that branch, for example the language Li calls “T’ienpao” (probably Debao county Yang Zhuang), classified as Central Taic phonologically, has a number of lexical forms usually found only in Northern Taic languages (1977: xiv).

Zhang et al. (1999:9) also states that Southern Zhuang vocabulary is more similar to that of Thai, Lao and Dai than that of the Northern Zhuang and Bouyei languages, presumably because of less lexical borrowing from Chinese languages. However, Southern Zhuang languages as well as Northern Zhuang languages have long been influenced by dialects of Chinese. Zhang et al. also states that, when speaking about matters of daily life, the average speaker of Zhuang uses 30–40% Chinese loanwords; when speaking about issues of government or economics, the percentage of loanwords rises to 80%. But Edmondson states that “Northern Zhuang shows a much greater degree of contact with the Han language than does Southern Zhuang. In most cases, Han loans [in Southern Zhuang] have been nativized into the tonal system long ago” (1994:178).

Generally speaking, both Northern and Southern Zhuang dialects follow the general Tai principle that historically unvoiced initial consonants result in higher pitched tones whereas historically voiced initial consonants result in lower pitched tones. However, Edmondson notes that in the extreme southwest locations such as eastern Yunnan, there is some tendency for this to flip-flop (with the historically unvoiced initials resulting in lower pitched tone sets). Though many of the Southern Zhuang dialects follow the standard Tai voiced-low split, Edmondson identifies additional splits which have occurred in some dialects, such as those of Daxin, Yongnan (South), Fusui and Long’An, usually affecting open (or "live") syllables containing the prototones A and C, as well as closed syllables (or "dead," tones DS and DL), apparently conditioned by aspiration and preglottalization (Edmondson 1994).

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5 In Chinese these are called “Zhuang yu nanbu fangyan (壮语南部方言)” and “Zhuang yu beibu fangyan (壮语北部方言)”, respectively.
6 Proto-Taic unaspirated oral plosives have merged with the aspirated oral plosives in Southern Zhuang when preceding a liquid.
1.2 The Central Taic Languages

In this paper, we will focus primarily on the Yunnan Central Taic languages whose speakers have been classified within the Zhuang nationality. In the following information based on intelligibility testing and phonological comparisons, we identify two main Central Taic languages spoken by Yunnan Zhuang: Nong Zhuang and Dai Zhuang, as well as introduce a much smaller newly discovered language, Min Zhuang, which appears to also be Central Taic. In addition to these three distinct languages, there also appears to be at least one Taic language spoken by people classified within the Dai nationality, further to the West in Honghe Hani and Yi Autonomous prefecture, and small pockets of speakers of other Central Taic languages in Funing County to the far east of the province; these languages may more closely resemble the Central Taic Yang Zhuang, Zuojiang Zhuang and/or Yongnan Zhuang of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region (hereafter "Guangxi") than the other Yunnan Central Taic languages.

Chinese linguists, such as Wei and Tan (1980) and Zhang et al. (1999), have previously identified the two main central Taic languages spoken in Yunnan as “subdialects” of Southern Zhuang and have assigned them names based on the counties in which they are spoken: Yan-Guang (砚广), spoken in southern Guangnan County (广南县), Yanshan County (砚山县), Maguan County (马关县), northern Wenshan County (文山县), Xichou County (西畴县) and Malipo County (麻栗坡县); and Wen-Ma (文马), spoken in southern Wenshan County (文山县), southern Malipo County (麻栗坡县), eastern Maguan County (马关县) and Zhongheying township of Kaiyuan Municipality (开远市中和营镇).

We will generally refer to these varieties by the name used by the speakers themselves: Nong, Dai and Min; though usually we add the name of their official nationality classification, “Zhuang,” to avoid confusion with the Tibeto-Burman language of Myanmar and western Yunnan and Myanmar called “Nung” (Anong, ISO code [nun]) or the official Nung nationality of Vietnam (whose languages are grouped under the ISO code [nut]), with the official Dai nationality of China, most of whom speak Southwestern Taic languages, or with the dialects of Chinese spoken in Fujian province (as well as Taiwan and elsewhere) known as Min (ISO codes [mnp], [cdo], [nan], [czo]). These three languages have recently been registered with the International Standards Organization’s system for standard naming of languages (ISO 639-3) under the following names and codes: Zhuang, Nong [zhn], Zhuang, Dai [zhd], and Zhuang, Minz [zgm].

In addition to these two dialects spoken in Yunnan, Zhang et al. (1999) lists three other Southern Zhuang dialects spoken in Guangxi:

- The “Yongnan dialect (邕南)” is spoken in the following Guangxi counties: southern Yongnan (邕南), Long’an (隆安), Fusui (扶绥), Shangsi (上思), Qinzhou (钦州), and Fangcheng (防城). This language is now registered with ISO 639-3 under the name of “Zhuang, Yongnan” and with the code [zyn]. Zhuang et al. 1999 provides the figure of 1,460,000 speakers in 1982. Based on year 2000 national census data, we estimate a year 2000 population for this variety at around 1,800,000 speakers.

- The “Zuojiang dialect (左江)” is spoken in the following Guangxi counties: Tiandeng (天等), Daxin (大新), Chongzuo (崇左), Ningming (宁明), Longzhou (龙州) and Pingxiang (凭祥). This language is now registered with ISO 639-3 under the name of “Zhuang, Zuojiang” and with the code [zzj]. Zhuang et al. 1999 provides the figure of 1,384,000 speakers in 1982. Based on year

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7 Wei and Qin (1980) uses the word tuyu, which can be translated as “subdialect” or “vernacular.”
8 The ISO 639-3 language name and code tables are available online at: http://www.sil.org/iso639-3/codes.asp.
2000 national census data, we estimate a year 2000 population for this variety at around 1,500,000 speakers.

- The “Dejing dialect (德靖)” is spoken in the following Guangxi counties: Debao (德保), Jingxi (靖西) and Napo (那坡). This language is now registered with ISO 639-3 under the name of “Zhuang, Yang” and with the code [zyg]. Zhang et al., (1999), provide a population of 979,000 speakers in 1982, but based on year 2000 national census data, we estimate a year 2000 population for this variety (in China) at around 870,000 speakers.9

Other members of the Central Tai family include the E language (ISO code [eee]), spoken in the Rongshui Miao Autonomous County in Guangxi province (approximately 30,000 speakers in 1993, Gordon 2004), and several languages spoken in Northern Vietnam: Nùng (ISO code [nut]), Tày (ISO code [tyz]), Cao Lan (ISO code [mlc]) and probably Ts‘ün-Lao (ISO code [tsl]). The speaker population of these Vietnamese Central Tai language groups number around two million10 (Gordon 2004).

According to Zhang et al. (1999:47), Nong Zhuang is relatively close to Yang Zhuang (De-Jing) and Zuojiang Zhuang. Dai Zhuang, on the other hand, is reportedly the most unique among the Southern Zhuang dialects. This dialect has retained voiced initial consonants and vowel raising and rounding, whereas final stops have disappeared. The Wenshan dialect of Dai Zhuang as spoken in Heimo village may have the most restrictive syllable structure of all Zhuang dialects, with only 36 possible syllable rhymes, whereas other dialects usually have 80 to 100.

1.3 Geography and Population

Of the almost 1.2 million Zhuang people residing in China’s Yunnan province, over one million live the Wenshan Zhuang and Miao Autonomous Prefecture (Wenshan Zhuang Zu Miao Zu Zizhi Zhou, 文山壮族苗族自治州), located in the southeast corner of the province, bordering Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region and Vietnam (Yunnan Province 2004). Wenshan is a subtropical mountainous region with elevation ranging from 1,380 to 1,600 meters. The tropic of Cancer bisects the prefecture just north of the Yanshan and Funing county seats and south of Qiubei and Guangnan counties. The majority of the prefecture lies within the rectangle formed by 23 to 24° N latitude and 104 to 106° E longitude. Being both high in elevation and on the edge of the tropics, Wenshan enjoys mild weather in both winter and summer with plentiful rainfall in the summer. Most areas are too mountainous for large-scale commercial farming; many areas are well suited to terraced rice-paddy farming, tea plantations, fruit orchards, tobacco, rapeseed and maize fields and an abundant variety of vegetables and medical herbs, such as the famous Sanqi root of Yanshan and Wenshan counties and the hot peppers of Guangnan County. Guangnan County’s Babao glutinous rice and rice and corn liquor are also famous, as are the star anise of Funing County and the Pu’er tea grown throughout the prefecture. In addition to this agriculture, small scale livestock husbandry (hogs, ducks, chicken, etc.) is practiced by most villagers. There is also small-scale coal, mineral and metal mining in some areas and controlled forestry.

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9 Surprising our 2000 population for this group is smaller than Zhang et al. 1999’s population for 1982. We have included all Zhuang nationality peoples in the three counties of Jingxi, Debao and Napo, except for 26,000 Jingxi county speakers of Long’an (Edmondson, Gregerson and Nguyen 2000), plus 20,000 possible speakers of Yang related dialects (e.g. Tianbao) in Funing county, Yunnan, to reach the figure of 870,000 possible speakers.

10 Central Taic languages in Vietnam include: Nùng [nut], spoken by 856,412 (1999 census) people in Cao Bang, Lang Son, Bac Thái, Hà Tuyên, Hà Bạc, Hoàng Lien Son, Quảng Ninh, Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, Lam Đồng provinces; Tày [tyz], spoken by 1,477,514 (1999 census) people in Cao Bằng, Lang Sơn, Hà Giang, Tuyên Quang, Bắc Thái, Hoàng Lien Sơn, Quảng Ninh, Hà Bắc and Lam Đồng provinces; Cao Lan, also known as Man Cao Lan and San Chay [mlc], spoken by 147,315 (1999 census) in Bắc Thái, Quảng Ninh, Hà Bạc, Cao Bang, Lang Sơn and Hà Tuyên provinces; and Ts‘ün-Lao [tsl], spoken by around 10,000 people in Lai Châu Province. (Gordon 2005)
As 90% of Yunnan’s Zhuang speakers live in Wenshan Prefecture, we have focused our research primarily on the Central Taic speakers living within Wenshan. Wenshan Prefecture has an area of 31,456 square kilometers and lies on the borders between China’s Yunnan and Guangxi provinces and between China and Vietnam in the extreme southeast of Yunnan province, approximately 350 km from Kunming, the provincial capital. The Prefecture administers eight counties: Wenshan (文山), Yanshan (砚山), Qiubei (丘北), Guangnan (广南), Xichou (西畴), Maguan (马关), Malipo (麻栗坡), and Funing (富宁). Maguan, Malipo, and Funing counties share a common border with Vietnam; Wenshan has 438 kilometers of international border, and an official port of entry at Tianbao Township in Malipo County. Eleven official nationalities live within the Prefecture including the Han, Zhuang, Miao, Yi, Yao, Hui, Dai, Bai, Bouyei, Mongolian, and Gelao.

In Wenshan, as in other neighboring regions, ethnic groups are often intermixed geographically without clearly definable geographical boundaries, at least if one only considers the lay of the land from a two dimensional perspective. Altitude, roads, markets, and water sources are important factors in the relative distribution of the various ethnic groups. An introduction to Wenshan Prefecture, *Wenshan Zhuangzu Miaozu Zizhizhou Gaikuang* (1986), records a local saying: “Han and Hui live by the market, Zhuang and Dai live by the water, Miao and Yi live on the mountains, Yao lies among the bamboo.”¹¹ (汉族、回族住街头, 壮族、傣族住水头, 苗族、彝族住山头, 瑶族住箐头). Although today members of all ethnic groups can be found in the market towns and Han can be found in almost every district, one still sees most Zhuang and Dai rural villages located near rivers and streams at the lower altitudes, with Yi and Miao often living higher up on the hills and mountains, and the Yao often living in the most remote, forested areas, especially in Funing and other eastern areas of the province.

Outside of this prefecture, Zhuang are also found in Yunnan’s Honghe Hani and Yi Autonomous Prefecture and Quqing Municipality, as well as smaller numbers in three counties in the far north of the province. The county with the largest population of Zhuang in Yunnan outside Wenshan is Mengzi County, a little over 100 km to the west of Wenshan County. Dodd records that according to the travel accounts of both Colquhoun (author of a 19th century travel account entitled *Across Chryse*) and F. D. A. Bourne (a British consular agent, stationed in Chongqing), both of whom visited Mengzi during the 1880s, there were large numbers of visibly Taic people in Mengzi, apparently speaking a Taic language. But when Dodd himself visited Mengzi in May 1910 he was unable to find any Taic-speaking peoples in the area, though he spent almost a whole week there looking (1923). Today, according to the Honghe Prefecture Ethnic Research Institute and the Mengzi County Ethnic Affairs Bureau there are few if any of Mengzi County’s almost 40,000 Nong Zhuang who still speak Zhuang (2006 personal communication). The Kunming-Hanoi narrow gauge railway was already functioning at that point, making Mengzi the largest and most lively market and transit town in southeast Yunnan, so this influx of economic and other activity from outside may have contributed to the sinicization of the Zhuang of Mengzi.

While our study did not include research in Quqing Municipality’s Zhuang area from reports from Wenshan Zhuang in bordering areas of Guangnan and Qiubei, it seems that Qiubei’s Zhuang are Yei Zhuang and speak Northern Taic varieties intelligible to the Yei Zhuang of Qiubei County and northwestern Guangnan County.

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¹¹ Throughout this paper, English translations of quotations from Chinese or French language sources are those of the author.
### Zhuang Population in Yunnan Province, 2003


(Abbreviations: Auto. = Autonomous, Cty. = County, Mun. = Municipality, Pref. = Prefecture)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>administrative unit</th>
<th>total population</th>
<th>total Zhuang</th>
<th>percentage</th>
<th>language(s)</th>
<th>location of concentrations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yunnan province</td>
<td>43,756,000</td>
<td>1,155,427</td>
<td>2.64%</td>
<td>Nong Zhuang, Dai Zhuang, Guibian Yei Zhuang, Qubei Yei Zhuang, etc.</td>
<td>More than 90% of Yunnan’s Zhuang live in the southeast corner of the province, specifically in Wenshan Pref.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wenshan Zhuang and Miao Auto. Pref.</td>
<td>3,322,392</td>
<td>1,001,194</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>Nong Zhuang, Dai Zhuang, Guibian Yei Zhuang, Qubei Yei Zhuang, etc.</td>
<td>Numerous in all eight counties; most numerous in Guangnan and Funing counties and least numerous in Xichou and Malipo counties.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(文山壮族苗族自治州)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wenshan Cty. (文山县)</td>
<td>428,912</td>
<td>92,699</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>Nong Zhuang, Dai Zhuang</td>
<td>Nong primarily in Binglie (秉烈) District and Matong (马塘) Township, Dai Zhuang in Kaihua (开化), Panzhihua (攀枝花), Matong and Dehou (德厚) townships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yanshan Cty. (砚山县)</td>
<td>442,380</td>
<td>137,022</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>Nong Zhuang, Dai Zhuang</td>
<td>Dai Zhuang primarily in western Yanshan, especially Pingyuan (平远) Township, Nong Zhuang in eastern Yanshan, especially in Zhela (者腊) and Bang’ (蚌峨) districts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xichou Cty. (西畴县)</td>
<td>250,198</td>
<td>24,881</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Nong Zhuang</td>
<td>A handful of villages primarily along the Chouyang river, from Jijie (鸡街) District in the north of the Cty., and then along the river south of the Cty., seat down towards Malipo Cty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malipo Cty. (麻栗坡县)</td>
<td>270,851</td>
<td>32,900</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>Nong Zhuang, Dai Zhuang</td>
<td>Nong in Babu (八布), Yangwan (新寨), Nanwanhe (南温河) districts and Mali (麻栗) Township, Dai Zhuang in the northwest corner of the Cty. in Daping (大坪) District.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maguan Cty. (马关县)</td>
<td>352,410</td>
<td>54,643</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>Nong Zhuang, Dai Zhuang</td>
<td>Nong Zhuang scattered throughout the Cty., especially in Nankou Township (南榜) and along the southern border.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qubei Cty. (丘北县)</td>
<td>446,240</td>
<td>122,654</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>Qubei Yei Zhuang (&quot;She&quot;), Nong Zhuang</td>
<td>Predominately Qubei Yei Zhuang found throughout the Cty. in all districts and townships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guangnan Cty. (广南县)</td>
<td>744,319</td>
<td>318,889</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>Nong Zhuang, Guibian Yei Zhuang (&quot;She&quot;), Dai Zhuang, Buyang</td>
<td>Nong in center and south of the Cty., especially Liancheng (连城), Jumuo (旧莫), Zhetu (者兔), Zhujie (珠街), Nalun (那伦), Nasa (那洒), Zhulin (珠琳), Wuzhu (五珠), and southern Ake (阿科) districts and townships, Yei Zhuang in the northern and eastern of the Cty., especially Zhetai (者太), Diyu (底圩), Bada (八达), Tangshang (堂上), northern Ake, Babao (八宝), Yangliujing (杨柳井), Banbang (板蚌), Dai Zhuang Zhulin township.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funing Cty. (富宁县)</td>
<td>387,082</td>
<td>217,506</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>Guibian Yei Zhuang, Nong Zhuang, Tianbao, Min Zhuang, Buyang, Long’ain, Jiachou, Buli*, etc.</td>
<td>Zhuang are a majority in most districts and townships, and over 90% in Bo’ai (剥隘), Naneng (那能), Zhesan (者桑), and Gula (谷拉) districts/townships. Zhuang are the most numerous throughout the Cty., with many other Zhuang groups scattered among the Yei. Zhuang.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pref.</td>
<td>Population</td>
<td>Nong Zhuang</td>
<td>Dai Zhuang, Qibei Ye Zhuang</td>
<td>Note</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honghe Hani and Yi Auto. Pref. (红河哈尼族彝族自治县)</td>
<td>4,130,463</td>
<td>99,132</td>
<td>0.02%</td>
<td>Primarily in Mengzi and Hekou counties, but smaller populations in Kaiyuan, Gejiu, Pingbian, Mie, Luxi, Yuanyang, and Jinping.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gejiu Mun. (个旧市)</td>
<td>453,311</td>
<td>14,751</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>probably Dai Zhuang</td>
<td>Manhao township (曼耗镇).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaiyuan Mun. (开远市)</td>
<td>292,039</td>
<td>13,629</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>Dai Zhuang</td>
<td>Zhongheying township (中和营镇).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mengzi Cty. (蒙自县)</td>
<td>340,051</td>
<td>37,938</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>Dai Zhuang, Nong Zhuang</td>
<td>Dai Zhuang in Shuiba district (水坝地区); Nong in Duofale Zhuang Township (多法勒壮族自治镇) and Zhiqin Township’s Shimajiao Village (芷村镇石马脚).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pingbian Yao Auto. Cty. (屏边苗族自治县)</td>
<td>149,088</td>
<td>3,722</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>Nong Zhuang (88%), Yei (‘Sha’) Zhuang (15%)</td>
<td>Nong in Dahebian (大河边) Village in Heiping District (和平乡), Baihe District Seat (白河乡), Xialati Village (下腊梯) in Dishuiceng District (滴水层乡), Tazhanni (它占泥), Sanjia (三家), Luonishang (倮尼上), Shangzhai (上寨), and Banpo (半坡) villages in Xinhua District (新华乡); Yei in Dashuigou (大水沟) and Liumatan (溜马滩) villages in Baihe District.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mile Cty. (弥勒市)</td>
<td>495,642</td>
<td>5,889</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>Qibei Ye Zhuang</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luxi Cty. (泸西县)</td>
<td>365,585</td>
<td>2,505</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>Qibei Ye Zhuang</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yuan Yang Cty. (元阳县)</td>
<td>362,950</td>
<td>3,353</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jinping Miao, Yao, and Dai Auto. Cty. (金平苗族瑶族傣族自治县)</td>
<td>316,171</td>
<td>5,764</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>probably Nong Zhuang</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hekou Yao Auto. Cty. (河口瑶族自治县)</td>
<td>95,451</td>
<td>10,285</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>probably Nong Zhuang</td>
<td>Qiaotou Yao Zhuang Township (桥头苗族壮族自治镇).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*According to Dai and He (2006:122), Buli (布俚) is a subgroup of the Sha/Yei Zhuang living along the Jinsha River, but as Lu and Nong’s (1998) Buli wordlist appears significantly different than their Buyei wordlist (布越), and several sources list the Buli (布俚) separately from the Buyei for the time being we are listing Buli as a distinct language group until we are able to confirm that they speak Guibian Yei also. Dai and He also seem to be distinguishing between 布越 and 布瑞 (2006:120-122), though in He’s 1998 work he translated 布瑞 into English as “Buyei” (1998:53) and Dai and He transcribe 布瑞 as [pu²²jai¹³] (2006:114). As no IPA or English phoneticization is provided for “布瑞” in Dai and He, for the moment we are unable to determine if these are simply two different Chinese phoneticizations of the autonym of the same Zhuang ethnic group, or represent two different Zhuang ethnic groups. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Urbanization</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lijiang Mun. (丽江市)</td>
<td>1,126,646</td>
<td>3,916</td>
<td>&lt;1% Yei Zhuang (&quot;Sha&quot;)</td>
<td>A few villages in Huaping, Ninglang, Lijiang, and Yongsheng counties.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huaping Cty. (华坪县)</td>
<td>154,968</td>
<td>1,339</td>
<td>1% Yei Zhuang (&quot;Sha&quot;)</td>
<td>Several small villages on the Jingsha River (金沙江).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ninglang Yi Auto. Cty.</td>
<td>229,204</td>
<td>1,165</td>
<td>1% Yei Zhuang (&quot;Sha&quot;)</td>
<td>Several small villages on the Jingsha River (金沙江).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kunming Mun. (昆明市)</td>
<td>5,781,294</td>
<td>16,382</td>
<td>&lt;1% Yei Zhuang (&quot;Sha&quot;)</td>
<td>Mainly in Luquan Cty., also a few in Lunan (路南) Cty. and various Zhuang civil servants, business people, students and laborers in Kunming city proper.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luquan Yi and Miao Auto. Cty.</td>
<td>429,355</td>
<td>2,416</td>
<td>1% Yei Zhuang and Buli Zhuang</td>
<td>Several small villages on the Jingsha River (金沙江).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qujing Mun. (曲靖市)</td>
<td>5,466,089</td>
<td>28,589</td>
<td>1% Guibian Yei Zhuang, Buli Zhuang</td>
<td>Primarily in Shizong (师宗) Cty., but also smaller populations in Luoping (罗平), Xuanwei (宣威), Huize (会泽), and Fuyuan (富源) counties.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shizong Cty. (师宗县)</td>
<td>349,770</td>
<td>22,290</td>
<td>6% Guibian Yei Zhuang (&quot;Zhongjia,&quot; &quot;Sha&quot;), Buli Zhuang</td>
<td>Primarily in Wulong Zhuang District (五龙壮族乡), Gaoliang Zhuang and Miao District (高良壮族苗族乡), and Longqing Yi and Zhuang District (龙庆彝族壮族乡).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Smaller Zhuang populations also exist in Dali Prefecture’s Heqing County (Duomei District) and Xishuangbanna Prefecture’s Mengla County (Yao District) according to He (1998).
As mentioned previously, outside of Yunnan province there are over four million Central Taic speakers in China’s Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, divided among several different Southern Zhuang languages, as well as the E language, spoken in the Rongshui Miao Autonomous County of Guangxi. In northern Vietnam, along the border with Yunnan and Guangxi, there are around two million speakers of four central Taic language groups whose levels of intercomprehension with Southern Zhuang varieties may be quite high. The total number of speakers of Central Taic languages, in China’s Guangxi and Yunnan provinces and Northern Vietnam, is in excess of seven million.

1.4 Ethnic History and Identity

While there are various theories about the pre-history of the Taic-speaking peoples of southern China and Southeast Asia, it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the archaeological and other evidence. For as long as we have recorded history for this region, the Taic peoples have been present. We do know that in ancient times the Taic people began establishing their villages on river banks and shore sides and developed a sophisticated system of rice paddy farming. The importance of rice paddy farming to the Taic peoples can be seen in the frequency with which the Taic word for rice paddy or field, *na*, is used in geographical names: within Yunnan Province alone there are approximately one thousand village names that include the Taic word *na*, over half of which are in Wenshan prefecture (Huang and Wang 2000).

In ancient Chinese records, the ancestors of the modern Taic peoples are known during the Warring States (476–221 BC) and Qin dynasty (221–206 BC) periods of Chinese history as “Baiyue” (百越) or “Baipu” (百濮) (Mengzi Xian Zhi 1995:131). As Chinese understanding of the ethnic groups to the south increased, the Baiyue were divided into more specific groupings in Chinese records. Already in the Qin period, the term “Luoyue” (骆越) was being used to refer to the Nong Zhuang (Wenshan Min-Zong Wei 2005: 317). Zhang et al. (1999:12) states that the term “Xi’ou” (西瓯) was used to refer to the ancestors of today’s speakers of the Northern Taic languages, that is, those who are now classified within the Zhuang and Bouyei nationalities in China, whereas “Luoyue” referred to the ancestors of those who now speak Central and Southwestern Taic languages, now classified within China’s Zhuang and Dai nationalities. In Chinese historical records of the two Han dynasties (206 BC–220 AD) and continuing throughout the Tang (618–907 AD) and Song (960–1279) dynasties, we also see use of the term “Liao” (獠 or 僚), which Dodd (1923) claims to be an ancient ethnonym of the Taic peoples (Wenshan Min-Zong Wei 2005: 317, Mengzi Xian Zhi 1995:132). During the Han dynasties, the region now included in Guangnan province formed a kingdom named “Gouding (句町),” and the term “Phu” (濮) was also used of the Taic peoples of this kingdom, possibly related to the Taic word *pu/phu/бу* still used to this day by most Zhuang groups, meaning “tribe, people, person, ethnic group.”

Chinese records from the Yuan (1271–1368 AD), Ming (1368–1644 AD), and Qing (1644–1911 AD) dynasty periods start to recognize the presence of a number of more specific ethnic groups in Wenshan prefecture. The *Kaihua Fuzhi* (Kaihua Prefecture Gazetteer, 1828) of the late Qing period includes an appendix of “types of people” (种人) which lists a number of ethnic groupings in the Wenshan area, among them the Nong, Sha and Tuliao (Tang et al. 2004; Wenshan Min-Zong Wei 2005:329ff.).

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12 During the Tang and Song dynasties, parts of Yunnan were governed by the Nanzhao (748–902 AD) and Dali (937–1253) kingdoms, centered around Erhai lake, northwest of Kunming.
13 Mengzi Xian Zhi cites the Chinese historical record entitled *Huayang Gao Zhi, Nan Zhong Zhi, 13:《华阳国志·南中志·十三》.*
14 Some use a form of the word *kwn/kon* instead, which is another word for “person/people,” used as a measure word in Nong Zhuang in a way similar to ge (个) in Chinese.
15 The original *Kaihua Fuzhi* made use of Chinese characters containing the “dog” radical (犭) for a number of ethnic groups, including the Nong and the Dai Zhuang. The Nong are referred to as “犭农人, Nongren” and the Dai Zhuang as “犭獠, Tuliao.”
The increasing specification with which Chinese archives record the various ethnic groups in the area reflects the increased control China exerted over the area now incorporated into Yunnan province. As Giersch (2006) has pointed out, Yunnan as a Chinese government entity is a relatively recent creation, dating to the establishment of the “Yunnan Branch Central Secretariat” by the Mongolian Yuan dynasty in 1274, following their defeat of the Dali kingdom. However, Chinese involvement in the region goes back to the 4th century BC when the conflict between the Chu and Qin kingdoms overflowed into the Yunnan area. Subsequent Chinese dynasties occasionally attempted to assert their sovereignty over the various indigenous kingdoms of Yunnan, but it wasn’t until the Ming period that significant cultural integration of Yunnan into China occurred because of the permanent stationing of Chinese troops in frontier areas and market towns and large numbers of Han settlers (Giersch 2006: 34). Giersch credits the Ming dynasty with formalizing the “native official system”, through which predominately non-Han areas like Wenshan would be governed by indigenous officials, known as *tusi* (土司) and *tuguan* (土官), throughout the Ming and Qing dynasties all the way into the mid 20th century.

In Wenshan area, the most famous of the Taic aristocracies is that of the Nong family, who as *Tusi* (侬氏土司) governed a large area including modern day Guangnan, Funing, Yanshan, Xichou, Malipo, and Qiubei counties for seven centuries, from the Tang dynasty up until 1948. This family apparently was ethnically Nong and was comprised of speakers of a Central Taic variety, though some Yei Zhuang (Sha) and Dai Nam (Shui Dai, of the Dai nationality) also trace their ancestry to this family (Wenshan Min-Zong Wei 2005:317ff). Beginning in the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) part of the area now included in Funing County (specifically the county seat, Lida (里达), Mulun (睦伦), and Muyang (木秧) districts) was incorporated into “Funing Zhou” (within Guangnan Fu) and governed by another Taic-speaking family named Shen (Shum, 沈) through the office of *tuguan* (土官). In the west of what is now Wenshan, there were a number of smaller domains governed by officials of a variety of ethnic groups, including some other Taic speaking officials.

By Qing dynasty times (1644–1911), the Wenshan area had been divided into several different prefectures called in Chinese *fu* (府) or *zhou* (州): Kaihua *Fu* governed the western parts of modern day Wenshan prefecture, including Wenshan, western Malipo, Xichou, Maguan, western Yanshan and bits of what is now eastern Honghe Hani and Yi Autonomous Prefecture. Guangnan *Fu* governed modern-day Guangnan County, Funing County, eastern Yanshan County and eastern Malipo County. Modern-day Qiubei was governed by Guangxi *Zhou* to the north (Tan 1987). Though many of the indigenous officials remained in their offices until the end of the Qing dynasty in 1911 or beyond, there was a parallel Han government in most areas, responsible for governing the Han soldiers, settlers, and merchants, and gradually Taic political power in the region diminished.

After the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the government began a process of officially recognizing China’s ethnic minority groups. In order to consolidate the hundreds of potential ethnic groupings and simplify the confusing abundance of autonyms and exonyms, social scientists of various types were charged with the task of researching these various groups during the 1950s. The term “Zhuang” (pronounced [tsuŋ⁴] or [ɕuəŋ⁴]) is a Taic autonym widely used in central and northern Guangxi by Northern Taic-speaking peoples there and has been used in written Chinese records there for centuries.

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16 The Nong and Shen *tusi* clans likely descend from the Nong and Shen (Cen) clans of Guangxi, who were powerful threats to Han Chinese rule in the Song and Ming dynasty periods. For a fascinating account in English of this history, see Barlow 1987 and Barlow 1989.

17 An area of southeast Maguan and southwest Malipo counties was governed by Vietnam during Qing dynasty (Tan 1987).
originally written as 童. This term, but now written slightly differently with the person radical 僙，was officially introduced in 1952 as a cover term for the Taic peoples of the “Guixi Zhuang Autonomous Region (桂西僮族自治州),” which became the “Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region (广西壮族自治区).” In 1958, following linguistic and other research in Yunnan, the Central Taic and Northern Taic-speaking language groups of Wenshan were added to this official ethnicity (or “nationality”). The character used to represent the Zhuang nationality was changed from 僙 (meaning ‘boy’) to 壮 (meaning ‘strong, healthy; magnificent’) in 1964, reportedly at the suggestions of Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai himself. (CASS 1994:838)

Although now officially classified within the Zhuang nationality, most of the Central and Northern Taic speakers of Wenshan Prefecture still consider themselves, and are considered by surrounding ethnic groups, to belong to one of three main ethnic groups: the pu Nong ([pʰu³¹ nɔŋ³³]), the pu Dai ([pʰu⁵⁵ ?dai³¹]), and the bu Ye ([pʰu³⁵ʔjai³⁴] / [pu³³juei³⁴] / [pu³³ji³⁴]). In the Chinese language, these three groups are known as “Nongzu” or “Nongren,” “Tuzu” or “Tuliao,” and “Shazu” or “Sharen,” respectively. As the prefixes pu and bu mean “people” or “ethnic group” in Zhuang, and “zu” and “ren” mean the same in Chinese, we will refer to these groups only by the names themselves. Although all Nong, Yei, and Dai are now officially part of the Zhuang nationality, these three groups remain distinct linguistically and culturally and at a local level.

In some Dai villages it is common (when speaking in Chinese) to refer to the Nong (the largest of the three groups) as “Zhuang” in contrast to themselves (whom they call “Tuzu” in Chinese, identical to the official name of an unrelated Mongolic ethnic group in the northwest of China).

Although Chinese terms for these groups are not perceived to be pejorative and are used frequently by the Zhuang themselves, as noted above, we will normally refer to these groups by an approximation of their autonyms followed by their official nationality, i.e. “Nong Zhuang,” “Dai Zhuang,” and “Yei Zhuang.”

The three ethnic groupings correlate with spoken languages: the Nong Zhuang and Dai Zhuang speak different Central Taic (Southern Zhuang) language varieties, whereas the Yei speak several Northern Taic varieties, which have been assigned the name “Guibian Northern Zhuang.”18 Zhang et al. (1999) considers the Northern Taic language of Qiubei County to be significantly different from the Northern Zhuang variety spoken in northern Guangnan and Funing counties.

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18 Guibian (桂边) means “on the edge of Guangxi.”
### Major Zhuang Ethnic Subgroups in Wenshan Prefecture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic group Name</th>
<th>Autonym in IPA</th>
<th>Name of ethnic group used in this work</th>
<th>Exonym in Chinese</th>
<th>Other exonyms and autonymy used in some areas</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>pu Nong (濮侬)</td>
<td>[pʰu³¹ nɔŋ³³], [pʰu²²nɔŋ⁴⁴]</td>
<td>Nong Zhuang</td>
<td>Nong (侬)</td>
<td>Nongzu (侬族), Nongren (侬人), Long (龙), bu Tei, Bendi (本地: ‘indigenous’)</td>
<td>Yanshan, Guangnan, Wenshan, Maguan, Funing, Xichou, Malipo (also in Honghe Prefecture and Vietnam)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pu Dai (濮岱)</td>
<td>[pʰu⁵⁵ʔdaːi³¹], [pʰu²²taːi¹¹]</td>
<td>Dai Zhuang</td>
<td>Tu (土)</td>
<td>Tulao (土僚、土老), Tuzu (土族), Pulao (濮僚; ancient ethnonym)</td>
<td>Yanshan, Wenshan, Maguan, Malipo, Guangnan counties (also in Honghe Prefecture and Vietnam)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bu Yai (布雅衣), bu Ye (布依, 布瑞, 布越)</td>
<td>[pu⁵⁵ʔjai³⁴], [pu³³juei³⁴], [pu²²jai¹³]</td>
<td>Yei Zhuang</td>
<td>Sha (沙)</td>
<td>Shazu (沙族), Sharen (沙人), Baisha (白沙), Nongqianbeng (侬迁绷), Zhongjia (仲家)</td>
<td>Funing, Guangnan counties (also in Guangxi) Qiubei, Li County, and other areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[pu³³jai³⁴]</td>
<td>Gui Bian Zhuang</td>
<td>Qiubei Zhuang</td>
<td></td>
<td>Qiubei (probably also in Qujing Municipality to the north)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The 2004 total population of Wenshan Prefecture is listed at 3,349,665 (Wen Nong Nian 1 Biao 2005). Of this number 29.9% (1,002,641) were of Zhuang nationality. As official censuses in China typically only distinguish among ethnic groups according to the officially recognized categories, there are not exact figures as to relative populations of the Nong, Yei and Dai Zhuang. However, Wenshan prefecture sources provide the following percentages for the three sub-branches of Zhuang in Wenshan Prefecture: 53% Nong, 36% Yei, and 11% Dai. The county-by-county population breakdown of the three major Yunnan Zhuang ethnic groupings is given in the following table (Wenshan Zhou Zhuang Zu Chuantong Wenhua Diaocha 2004, Wen Nong Nian Fu 1 Biao 2005):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Zhuang Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wenshan</td>
<td>91,550</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malipo</td>
<td>32,812</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guangnan</td>
<td>320,940</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qiubei</td>
<td>125,116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maguan</td>
<td>54,922</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yanshan</td>
<td>134,824</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funing</td>
<td>218,380</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xichou</td>
<td>24,097</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wenshan Prefecture Totals:</td>
<td>1,002,641</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to these three main groupings, the *Wenshan Prefecture Ethnic Gazetteer* (Wenshan Min-Zong Wei 2005) also identifies Zhuang subgroups called “Buxiong” and “Long’an,” and the *Funing County Ethnic Gazetteer* (Lu and Nong 1998), in addition to the five groups previously mentioned, identifies...
Butu (布土), Tianbao (天保), Bu’ao (布傲), Jiazhou (甲州), Longjiang (龙降), Mayang (麻央)—Yangwu (洋乌), Buli (布俚), Buyei (布越), Long’an (隆安), and Buyang (布央), some of which the prefecture gazetteer has included under the Nong or Yezi Zhuang categories. To our knowledge all of these subgroups with the exception of the Buyang are speaking varieties of Northern and Central Taic languages, but we do not know to what degree these different autonyms of the small Zhuang subgroups correspond to distinctive languages yet. In addition, members of the small Zhuang group calling themselves kwn Min do not identify themselves as belonging to any of the above groupings and speak what appears to be a distinct Zhuang language from the other known languages. Many of these Zhuang subgroups in Funing County result from more recent migrations into Yunnan from various locations in Guangxi, according to Lu and Nong (1998).

The Dai Zhuang, population around 120,000, are found primarily in the west of the prefecture, in central and northern Wenshan County (especially in Kaihua, Panzhihua, Matang, Laojiulong, and Dehui districts and townships), western Yanshan (especially Pingyuan township), Maguan County (especially Nanlao district) and western Malipo County, with a handful of villages in southwestern Guangnan in Zhulin township. There are also Dai Zhuang in Zhongheying Kaiyuan, Mengzi, and probably Gejiu counties in Honghe prefecture, as well as around 200 speakers in Muang Khuong, Lao Cai province, Vietnam, according to Edmondson, Gregerson, and Nguyen (2000). The Central Taic language Peter Ross (1996) identifies as “Dao Ngan Tay” appears too different phonologically to be considered a Dai Zhuang dialect.

Among residents of Wenshan prefecture, it is common locally to distinguish between at least four types of Dai Zhuang, based on the design of the headdress of the women’s traditional costume: Piled Headdress Tu (Da Tou Tu, 搭头土), Flat Headdress Tu (Ping Tou Tu, 平头土), Pointed Headdress Tu (Jian Tou Tu, 尖头土), Slanted Headdress Tu (Pian Tou Tu, 偏头土). While the names given to the Dai Zhuang of various areas based on the women’s headdresses are not pejorative, our research, conducted in villages of each of these four groups, indicates that the various Dai Zhuang communities all descend from common ancestors relatively recently (i.e. within the last century or two) and have on-going contact with each other, and the different headdresses seem to be more a result of local styles rather than ancient cultural or linguistic divisions. (The Nong Zhuang also have quite different headdresses in different areas.) Therefore, when necessary to acknowledge differences among the Dai Zhuang, we will refer to them primarily according to the relative location of the dialects but ultimately just speak of a single Dai Zhuang language:

- **Northern Dai Zhuang**: aka Piled Headdress Tu (Da Tou Tu, 搭头土, Daigelai, Black Tulao), Dai Zhuang as spoken in Northern Wenshan and Western Yanshan counties. (This is the largest subgroup of Dai Zhuang in terms of population.)

- **Central Dai Zhuang**: aka Flat Headdress Tu (Ping Tou Tu, 平头土, River Bank Tulao), Dai Zhuang as spoken in Central Wenshan County’s Panzhihua township, around the city of Wenshan.

- **Southern Dai Zhuang**: aka Pointed Headdress Tu (Jian Tou Tu, 尖头土), Dai Zhuang as spoken in Malipo and Maguan counties.

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19 Although the standard Pinyin for these characters (布越) is actually “buyue,” when Dai and He (2006) use the same Chinese characters for the Yezi Zhuang ethnic group, they provide the phonetic transcription [pu²²jai¹³]. There are no Chinese characters pronounced as “yei” or “yai” (nor are these possible syllable forms in Pinyin Romanization), so researchers writing in Chinese were forced to select a similar sounding character.

20 Buyang Zhuang speak one of three mutually unintelligible languages which Li Jinfang (1997) has classified into the Ge-yang branch of Kadai (or Kam-Tai).
Northeastern Dai Zhuang: aka Slanted Headdress Tu (Pian Tou Tu, 偏头土), Dai Zhuang as spoken in Guangnan and eastern Yanshan counties.

It is important to note that though the term “Tu” in the western part of the prefecture almost always refers to speakers of Dai Zhuang, in Funing County the term “bu Tu” is often applied to Northern Taic speakers. Likewise, the Nùng languages of Vietnam, while closely related, are probably not all mutually intelligible with the Nong Zhuang language of Wenshan prefecture.²¹

Although Zhuang are usually considered to be the original inhabitants of Wenshan prefecture, it is likely that the several Taic language groups in Wenshan have different histories. It is possible that the Dai Zhuang have lived in the Wenshan prefecture area the longest, hence their exonym “Tuzu,” which can mean “indigenous people.”²² According to He (1998), of all the Zhuang groups currently living in Yunnan, it is the Dai Zhuang who descend directly from the ancient Yunnan tribe known to the Chinese as “phu Lao (濮僚).” The Dai Zhuang are also considered to be the “most ancient ethnic group” (zui guluao de minzu) of Mengzi County, just to the west of Wenshan Prefecture, in Honghe Hani and Yi Autonomous Prefecture. Mengzi County has both Dai Zhuang and Nong Zhuang, but the Nong Zhuang are believed to have only arrived in Mengzi relatively recently during the Qing dynasty (1644–1911 AD), following a conflict among members of the Nong clan, who were the tusi, or tribal aristocracy, of Guangnan Prefecture (Fu) then (Mengzi Xian Zhi 1995:131–132).

The Nong Zhuang, on the other hand, and possibly the Yei Zhuang as well may have migrated to the Wenshan region from western Guangxi at some period, as their languages are more similar to some of Guangxi’s Zhuang languages. Chinese records from at least Tang dynasty times report the presence of an important clan of apparently Taic “barbarians” in what is now southwestern Guangxi and northeastern Vietnam named Nong (儂). The French scholar Savina claims that the “Nùng” were already a major Taic clan in the area that is now southeast China and northern Vietnam, and that the Nong, along with the other major Taic “tribes of Gui (桂) Zhou (周), and Huang (黄), ceaselessly revolted against the Chinese mandarins of Guangdong, Guangxi, Tonkin [Northern Vietnam], and Guizhou throughout the first ten centuries of our era.”²³ (Savina 1924: III) Savina cites the French commander and historian Lunet de Lajonqière²⁴ as saying that by the ninth century AD the Nong and Huang families were the most powerful of the Taic groups and occupied 18 Chinese prefectures south of the “Five Mountains.” Likewise Barlow (1987:254), citing Chinese historical records, explains that while the Huang clan of apparently Taic peoples revolted against the Tang dynasty administration in what is now Guangxi in 756 AD, by the second half of the ninth century, the Nong clan had risen in power and apparently allied itself with the powerful Nan Zhao kingdom of Yunnan.

By the advent of the Song Dynasty (960–1126 AD), the Song clan was more powerful than the Huang clan, and had established trade in gold and other precious goods with Cantonese traders from Guangdong. The Song Shi, or Song History, gives us a fascinating account of the Nong clan at this time, recording that

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²¹ There are some small Zhuang groups in southwestern Guangxi, e.g. in Jingxi county, who also call themselves Nong; we are not yet able to confirm whether these are far eastern pockets of the same Nong Zhuang language described here or whether they speak a different language variety.
²² The “Lao” syllable may derive from an ancient Taic autonym used by various Taic groups, e.g. the majority ethnic group of Laos. Dodd (1923) claims that the Lao/Lau autonym is a more ancient autonym than the widely used Tai/Dai/Thai autonym, and the originators of “Zhuang online” (www.rauz ) have proposed the term {rauz} [l/ra:u⁶] as a cover term for the cultures included in the Bouyei and Zhuang nationalities in China, as well as some Taic groups in Vietnam.
²³ “…durant les dix premiers siècles de notre ère, les tribus thai dont les principales étaient celles des Quei (桂), des Tchéou (周), des Hòang (黄), et des Nùng (儂) ne cessèrent de se révolter contre les mandarins chinois du Kouang-Tong, du Kouang-Si, du Tonkin et du Koui-Tchéou.”
²⁴ Lunet de Lajonqière, Ethnographie des Territoires Militaires, Hanoi, 1904.
they were rich in gold, numerous in population, “wore their hair long and fastened their clothes on the left. They loved to fight and struggle and regarded death lightly” (Song Shi, zhuan 495, pp. 14, 214–215, as quoted in Barlow 1987). They were governed both by male chieftains and, at least according to the Song Shi, by a powerful shamaness named Ah Nong (阿儂), who performed magic and human sacrifice. Apparently under her instruction, Ah Nong’s husband, Nong Quanfu (儂全福), killed his brother who was a leader in the Shen (Cen) clan and took his land. He founded a short-lived kingdom named Chang Qi Guo (長其國), but was captured by Phat Ma, the king of the Viet kingdom Dai Co Viet and executed. Ah Nong and their 14-year-old son Nong Zhigao (儂智高, b. 1025) managed to escape. Nong Zhigao (spelled Nùng-Tri-Cao in Vietnamese), as hereditary ruler of the Nong clan, first tried to appease both Viet and Chinese by tributes of gold, elephants and silver. He founded his own kingdom based at Longzhou (southwest of modern day Nanning, near the Vietnamese border), originally named Dali Kingdom (大歷国) but later renamed Nantian Kingdom (南天国). Nong Zhigao, aided by a Cantonese mandarin, Huang Wei (黃瑋), organized a highly mobile army of crossbow-shooting, shield-wielding trios who were able to conquer Chinese cities throughout Guangxi and western Guangdong, and besieged Guangzhou for 57 days in 1052 without conquering the fortified city. By 1053 Chinese reinforcements arrived in Guangxi and, either late in that year or in the first month of 1054, Nong Zhigao’s army was defeated north of the city of Yong (modern Nanning). Nong Zhigao, Ah Nong and Nong Zhigao’s sons fled to Temo village in Yunnan Province (today known as A’ying, in Wenshan Prefecture’s Guangan County, Yangliujing District), where they had lived for five years after his father was executed, during which time the widowed Ah Nong had married local chieftain Nong Xiaqing (儂夏卿) (Huang, Wang, Long and Wang 2003:11). Nong Zhigao’s ultimate fate remains a legend. He was unable to regather sufficient troops to rise against the Chinese, and in the following years, the Song administrators were successful in winning the loyalty of most of the Zhuang, although the Shen (Cen) clan would briefly rise against the Chinese during the Ming dynasty. (Barlow 1989)

Some say that Nong Zhigao fled to the Dali and Lijiang area of northwestern Yunnan, perhaps seeking support from the Dali Kingdom, and there remain several Zhuang villages in Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture (Heqing County’s Duomei District) and Lijiang Municipality to this day (in Huaping and Ninglang counties). Another version is that he fled to the powerful Taic kingdoms of Xishuangbanna (Sisongpanna) in southern Yunnan, and in Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture there remain over 2000 Zhuang who believe their ancestors arrived there via Laos after Nong Zhigao’s uprising. (He 1998:32–36)

Following Nong Zhigao’s defeat, apparently partially due to an unwillingness on the parts of the Huang and Shen clans to support him, the Nong clan members of Guangxi were forced to either flee the area (into Vietnam and Yunnan) or change their family name to that of the emperor, Zhao, according to Barlow (1989:26). Some of those who retained the family name Nong in Guangxi simplified it to the form 农 from 儂, apparently to disassociate themselves from the “Nong rebels” (Barlow 1989).

However, many Nong Zhuang speakers in Wenshan today still have the surname Nong (spelled either 农 or 侬, in the modern simplified forms of 農 and 儂 used today in P. R. China). In his picture book on the Yunnan Zhuang, He (1998) claims that the “Dao Nong,” that is the Nong Zhuang of Guangan County (known in the Song period as the Temo Dao, or Temo Highway, 特磨道), are the descendants of the remnant of Nong Zhigao’s army. The traditional ruling family of the Guangan area, named Nong (侬), who governed the area through the hereditary tusi and tuguan (ethnic deputy ruler) positions throughout

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25 In addition to Longzhou, there are several other important cities in this area of southwestern Guangxi with the “Long” syllable, such as Long’an and Longying. As the [n] and [l] sounds are often interchangeable in the Chinese dialects of this area (e.g. the Nong Zhuang are often referred to as the “Long” people), one wonders whether there is any ancient connection between these geographical names and the Nong clan name, though none is spelled with the same Chinese characters.
the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties and even into the Republican Period, are believed to be direct descendants of Nong Zhigao (He 1998:40), and Nong Zhigao is revered as a powerful deity by some Zhuang to this day.

To our knowledge, the earliest Western researcher to encounter the Nong Zhuang is Colquhoun, who visited Guangnan Fu in 1882 and had these observations about the “Long-jens” (Nong ren, ‘Nong people’) whom he found to be the most numerous ethnic group in the Fu: “the women of which tribe we found were remarkable for their cleanly, sober, yet dapper costume and appearance. One might almost fancy one’s self in a Norwegian glen on a Sunday morning, as we passed a troop of these tidy modest-looking, yet fearless women.” (as quoted in Dodd 1923:155) When the American, William Clifton Dodd, visited the same town in 1910 he also found Nong to be in the majority in the Guangnan Fu government, and though Nong Zhuang are no longer a numerical majority in modern day Guangnan County, Guangnan is the area where they remain the most numerous and in the highest concentrations. The Nong of Guangnan are perceived to be the most culturally traditional.

The Nong Zhuang are the largest Zhuang ethnic grouping in Yunnan province, numbering around 550,000, and are found in largest concentrations in central and southern Guangnan County (especially in Zhetu, Nalun, Liancheng, Jiumo, Nasa, Zhulin, Zhujie, Wuzhu and southern Ake districts and townships), Yanshan County (especially in Zhela, Bang’e, Ganhe, Ameng, Jiangna, and Panlong districts and townships) and Wenshan County (especially in Bingle, Matang and Laohuilong districts and townships). Smaller concentrations live in the remaining five counties: Maguan, Xichou, Malipo, Fuming and Qiubei.

There is quite a bit of variety of costume and dialect among the Nong Zhuang of Wenshan prefecture, and He (1998:40–44) identifies five different subgroups of Nong, largely based on costume and geography. Dai and He (2006:117) mention four of these, including Zhuang pronunciation of these ethnonyms:

- The Nong Dau, or Dao Nong, live in Guangnan County and are the most numerous subgroup of Nong and according to He the Nong Dau were the main group supporting Nong Zhigao’s Southern Heavenly Kingdom (He 1998:40).
- The Nong Nyeng, or Niang Nong, live along the Chouyang River in Xichou and Malipo Counties and are also called “Blue-green Nong” for the color of their clothes.
- The Nong Du, or Du Nong, live along the Duzhou River in Maguan County.
- The Ting Nong live along the Puting River in central Funing County (Xinhua, Banlan and Guichao Townships). 27
- The Nong Jing, or Jin Nong, in northeastern Wenshan County and Yanshan County, also called “Upper Nong” “because they lived in the northern part of Wenshan County.”

Those names seem to correspond to the more noticeable differences in costume among the Nong Zhuang, especially concerning the women’s headdress. However, use of these names does not seem to be

26 Zhuang modifiers follow nouns, whereas Chinese modifiers precede nouns. Therefore the noun “Nong [nɔŋ⁴⁴]” begins the Zhuang forms of names, but ends the Chinese form of the names.
27 The Ting Nong are not mentioned in Dai and He (2006).
widespread among the Nong villagers. Instead Nong we interviewed simply refer to themselves as “Nong from [a given county, township, district or village].” Within the largest of these groups, the Nong Dau of Guangnan County, there seems to be noticeable variety among dialects and costumes.

Various sources agree that Nùng peoples and also the Tày peoples of Vietnam originated from China (Lã and Đặng 1968:31, 33; Savina 1924:V), though apparently they migrated to Vietnam in various different waves. Luu indicates that the division between the Nùng and Tày may not be an ancient one:

The Nùng and the Tày lived in the basin of the Xijiang [Xi River] in the region of Guangxi and Guangdong (China). After the failure of Nùng Trí Cao’s uprising against the Song, they found themselves divided by the Sino-Vietnamese border, the Tày living on the Vietnamese side and the Nùng living on the Chinese side. But, because of the ruthless oppression of the Chinese feudalism, successive massacres after failed uprisings, and shortages of land, the Nùng ended up migrating to Vietnam in several waves at different times. (Luu 1986: 170)28

Michael Howard, in his introduction to the English translation of French colonial ethnographer Maurice Abadie’s work on the ethnic groups of the Sino-Vietnamese border area (Abadie 2001:xxv-xxvi), cites Be, Nguyen and Chu (1992:48) as claiming that, though the clan named Nong / Nùng existed earlier, the term “did not refer to a separate ethnic name until the fifteenth century.” Along with Luu, Howard argues that those now officially categorized as Nùng in Vietnam have arrived there much more recently than their Tày cousins:

…the Nong name is also found among Tay people living in Vietnam and that members of this clan are associated with the original settlers in some areas, including those associated with the ancient lowland Tai kingdom of Au Lac. It appears that members of this clan settled in northern Vietnam well over two thousand years ago, but were subsequently integrated into Tay society, retaining only their names as an indication of their origins. More significant differences developed between the Tay and Nung in the highlands to the north after the border between China and Vietnam was established in the eleventh century with the Nung living to the north of the border and most Tay living to the south. Those people living in Vietnam at present who are identified as Nung migrated into the area one and two hundred years ago, like many Hmong and Mien, because of unsettled conditions in China.

Such a recent migration would increase the likelihood of mutually intelligibility between Chinese Nong varieties and Vietnamese Nùng varieties, though there is a variety of Nùng sub-groups in Vietnam whose dialects are so different as to make “mutual understanding…difficult” according to Howard (Abadie 2001:xxvi). Some of the Vietnamese Nùng sub-groups claim origins in regions of Guangxi where other Central Taiic languages are spoken, such as Yang, Zuojiang and Yongnan Zhuang. Also Saul and Wilson (1980:1) mention that the term Nùng has also been used in Vietnam for a dialect of rural Chinese closely related to Cantonese, for the ethnically Chinese of Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City), and also for the Tai languages now included in the Tày nationality group. So we must be careful in linking the Yunnan Nong Zhuang language to Nùng languages in Vietnam.

He (1998:42) claims that the Maguan County Duzhou River (赌咒河) Nong Zhuang are completely identical to the Nùng nationality of Vietnam, as far as language, customs and culture go, and Maguan Nong we interviewed confirmed this. Early 20th century women’s costumes of the “Nùng” of Northern Vietnam, photographed by Abadie, appear identical to those the Maguan Nong women wear today (Abadie 2001: plates 56 and 57, pages 113 and 114), but Abadie does not specify which of the several Nùng sub-groups/languages these costumes represent, nor does he give a location more specific than stating that “the Nùng are spread throughout Upper Tonkin, from the region east of Cao Bang up toward Lao Kay” but not beyond the Red River (Abadie 2001: 105). This area includes the entire Wenshan prefecture border with Vietnam, as well as that of Honghe Prefecture’s Hekou County and Guangxi’s Jingxi and Napo Counties.

Gedney’s Western Nung data was elicited primarily from a Nong (nɔŋ³³) speaker from the Chinese area just north of Muong Khuong District of Lai Cai Province, Vietnam, that is either Maguan County or Hekou County, but also from Nong speakers from Muong Khuong and Ban Lao in Vietnam. Though Gedney’s fieldnotes show some minor phonetic and lexical differences between the speaker from the Chinese side and those from the Vietnamese side²⁹, Gedney considered these all to be subdialects of the same language and speakers from the three areas apparently had no difficulties using their Nong dialects to communicate with each other (Hudak 1995:401–405). Edmondson, Gregerson and Nguyen (2000) report the presence of about 3000 speakers of Nùng Inh³⁰ in Muong Khuong City, and state that their speech is “a variety of Western Nung (as studied by Gedney).” Nicolson has studied the Nùng Inh of Lạng Sơn Province, further to the east, who reportedly originated from the Longyinzhou area of Guangxi (龙英州, in modern day Tiandeng county’s Longming Township) (Nicolson n.d.). In the section on comparative phonology we will examine the phonological relationship between Nong Zhuang of Wenshan Prefecture, Gedney’s Western Nung, and the Nùng Inh of Lạng Sơn Province.

The Min Zhuang are quite small in number, probably only around 2,600, inhabiting only eleven villages to the knowledge of the speakers we interviewed, all of which are in the extreme southeast corner of Yunnan province near the borders of Vietnam and China’s Guangxi province. All eleven villages³¹ are located in the Langheng area of Tianbeng Township and are in contact with each other. The Min Zhuang are surrounded by speakers of other Zhuang languages and are reportedly all bidialectal in Guibian (Yei) Northern Zhuang.

As mentioned previously, Funing County also contains pockets of speakers of several other Central Taic languages of Guangxi. According to Lu and Nong (1998), all three of the major Central Taic languages of Guangxi, Yang Zhuang, Zuojiang Zhuang and Yongnan Zhuang, are spoken by small numbers of Guangxi Zhuang. As these languages are better studied as part of a Guangxi-based research project, for the time being we have not included these languages in the present Yunnan Central Taic research project.

In addition to the Central Taic speakers in and around Wenshan Prefecture, there is one other language variety in the province that appears to also belong to the Central Taic branch, that of “Yuanjiang dialect

²⁹ The Chinese Nong speaker, Mr. Sin Fong Yiw, is the source for the majority of Gedney’s Western Nung data, which is identified by the initials “SFY” in his fieldnotes. Data from speakers from Muong Khuong is identified by “MK” and those from Banlao, which is 22 km north of Lao Cai city toward Muong Khuong, are identified by “BL.” (Hudak 1994:404–405)

³⁰ The autonym of the Lạng Sơn Province Nùng Inh is pronounced pronounced [iːɲ³³] or [iːŋ³³], according to Nicolson (Nicolson n.d.).

³¹ The eleven Min Zhuang speaking villages are: Guixun-Anhe (安哈-贵训), Sankeshu (三颗数), Xionggu (雄估), Shangmabu (上麻布), Tianfang (田坟), Getao (戈桃), Gezao (戈造), Gecai (戈才), Bagan (叭干), Na’en (那恩), Longnong (龙弄). All of these were believed to be near 100% Min Zhuang, with the exception of Shangmabu which is mixed with Nong Zhuang speakers. The population figure of 2,600 is based on the 1982 populations of the 10 purely Min Zhuang villages as recorded in Funing Xian Di Ming Zhi (1986), projected forward to 2000 based on the 2000 population figures for Zhuang nationality.
of the Dai language” as Chinese linguists Zhou and Luo (1999) have named it, also known as Tai Nam or Shui Dai (Water Tai), spoken by members of the official Dai nationality (not to be confused with Dai Zhuang) along the banks of the Red (Yuan) River in Yuanjiang, Yuanyang and Honghe counties in southern Yunnan. Not only does this language demonstrate some phonological features considered typical of Central (rather than Southwestern) Taic languages (see the following Phonological Comparison section), but genealogical and cultural evidence seems to indicate that these Dai nationality peoples can also trace their history back to Nong Zhigao. (Huang et al 2003:33) This may be the same language as that called “Sin Fong Yiw” by William Gedney (1995:410ff.). Gedney identified Sin Fong Yiw as being spoken on the north bank of the Red River within Yunnan province, but near the Vietnamese border. He considered it to belong to his Central Taic “Western Nung” group.

Within Wenshan Prefecture itself there are around 15,000 people classified in the Dai nationality (Yunnan Province 2004), almost all living in Maguan, Wenshan and Malipo counties. At least some of these people were the “Baiyi” (摆衣) ethnic group who were originally classified as Zhuang during the national classification of ethnic groups in the 1950s but then were reassigned to the Dai nationality in May 1980, according to the Wenshan Prefecture Ethnic Gazetteer (Wenshan Min-Zong Wei 2005:20), although this same document later lists the name “Baiyi” (摆衣) as another name for the “Bu Dai” or Dai Zhuang (p. 355). Two distinct languages are spoken among Wenshan prefecture’s Dai nationality people: Zhuang and Han Dai (p. 160). From the data provided in that work, it appears that the Zhuang spoken by the Dai is Nong Zhuang. The Han Dai is probably the same as the Maguan Dai dialect described in Zhou and Luo (1999), which is clearly a Southwestern Taic language and therefore not as closely related to the Central Taic languages as they are to each other, although perhaps it is becoming more similar in form due to contact influence from the surrounding Nong and Dai Zhuang languages.

1.5 Previous research

In this section we will briefly mention the published research that most pertains to the current study. On the topic of Taic languages in general there are more significant publications available than we can mention here. The interested reader is advised to consult the introductory chapters of Yongxian Luo’s The Subgroup Structure of the Tai Languages: A Historical-Comparative Study (Luo 1997) and Edmondson and Solnit’s Comparative Kadai: The Tai Branch (Edmondson and Solnit 1997) for recent summaries of comparative Tai research. On the topic of the cultures of the Zhuang nationality, little is available in English, but Chinese readers are encouraged to consult the Zhuang Encyclopedic Dictionary (Zhuangzu Baike Cidian, 1993).

William Gedney and Fang-Kuei Li’s pioneering articles and books on the history and classification of the Taic languages remains the core curriculum for this language family. Particularly important among these two linguists’ many works are Gedney’s 1972 article entitled “A Checklist for Determining Tones in Tai Dialects” and Li’s 1977 Handbook of Comparative Tai, both of which remain foundational for all Taic phonological and classificatory work.

Though Li did not personal research any of the Yunnan Central Taic languages to our knowledge, Gedney spent time during the 1960s eliciting data from displaced Nong [nɔŋ³³] speakers, then living in Vientianne, Laos, but originally from the Lao Cai province of Northern Vietnam and just across the border in China, probably from either Maguan or Hekou Counties. Gedney named this language “Western Nung” for its geographical position relative to other Vietnamese Nung languages, and his data appears to be extremely similar to the Nong Zhuang data (especially that representing the Southern dialect) gathered
from various locations in Wenshan Prefecture during the course of the present research project.\footnote{32} Gedney’s data will be examined in detail in the following section on comparative phonology.

Luo Yongxian’s dissertation, published under the title \textit{The Subgroup Structure of Tai Languages: A Historical-Comparative Study} (Luo 1997), provides an important extension and partial revision of Li’s work with implications for the study of these Yunnan Central Taic languages, though Luo does not use data from any of the languages studied in the current work in his analysis. His work will be discussed in more detail in the phonological comparison section following.

The earliest attempt to describe the Central Taic languages of Yunnan in a linguistic fashion seems to be that of William Clifton Dodd, an American missionary, fluent in the Northern Thai language of Chiang Mai, Thailand, who walked through the Wenshan (Kaihua) and Guangnan area in 1910 and transcribed brief wordlists using his own Roman-based phonetic notation. His account of his travels, including his wordlists, has been republished by a Thai publisher and is available under the title \textit{The Tai Race: Elder Brother of the Chinese} (Dodd 1923, 1996), and provides a fascinating snapshot of how the Wenshan Zhuang appeared to a foreigner a century ago:

\begin{quote}
There are good roads all the way from K’ai Hūa to Kuāng-nān fū [Guangnan County seat], five days about seventy-five miles. Indeed the road is good all the way from Mengtzu [Mengzi] to Kuāng-nān fū, about one hundred and thirty miles. We kept hearing of the Tai all the way, but always a little distance from the road. But when we got into Kuāng-nān prefecture, Wednesday, May 25, [1910] a rainy day, we found Tai again which whom we could converse rather freely.\footnote{33} We found that our noon-day stop was among Tai altogether. They told us that at least three-fifths—they said “six-tenths”—of the population of the whole prefecture is Tai. The Chinese do not call these Tai people Pā-yī, but T’ū jen \begin{footnotesize}\textit{土人}, \textit{tu ren}, “indigenous people”\end{footnotesize}. Unlike the Tai of K’ai-hūa, these Kuāng-nān Tai do not worship at Chinese joss-houses although some few of them are illiterate in the Chinese character. They told us that once a year they go to make offerings to the “spirits of the tigers and the spirits of the region,” \begin{footnotesize}\textit{hōō siū}, \textit{hōō mȫng}, \end{footnotesize} in a building set apart for that purpose. The offerings consist of pigs and chickens. They said that away from the big roads the women and even the men do not speak Chinese. While I detected a difference of vocabulary between the people here and anywhere else I had hitherto been, it seemed to me that the tones and accent seemed more like that of Chiangmai than like Lū, or Tai Nūa, or any other Tai dialect than that of the north of Siam. The people at that noon-day stop said that their ancestors came from Nān-chin and live there…At the prefectural city, Kuāng-nān fū, we had a royal time…what chiefly interested us was the fact that we were among Tai people with whom we could converse with considerable ease…[Leaving Kuāng-nān fū and setting off toward the east,] we slept in a village of Tai people, the last of the section of T’ū-jen which the Chinese call P’ū-nōng, or P’ūntūn, or P’ū lūng. We heard them called all three of these pretty names. And the subjects of these names substitute Tai for P’ū in all three. Tai Lūn I regard as their real name. (Dodd 1996:157)
\end{quote}

\footnote{32} The researchers were not aware of the relevance of Gedney’s data until the fieldwork had been completed, as Gedney’s “Western Nung” has typically been listed as a language of Vietnam, rather than of China. In fact, as the present work will show, there are far more speakers of “Western Nung” (Nong Zhuang) in China than in Vietnam.

\footnote{33} Dodd uses the term “Tai” to refer both to the Taic languages and the Taic peoples as a whole. He, himself, spoke the Southwestern Taic language of the Lanna area of Siam/Thailand, now often referred to as “Northern Thai.”
Dodd recognized the close relationship of the Central Taic languages of Yunnan to the Southwestern Taic languages of Thailand and noted that while many common lexical items, such as those for animals and body parts, were close cognates, Thai words dealing with religious topics seemed to have no cognates in the central Taic languages, as many of these were Sanskrit and Pali borrowings rather than indigenous Taic words. Though Dodd was not a trained linguist, through his informal methods he concluded that “only a little more than one word in eight seemed essentially different from the standard literary Tai” of Lanna, that is Northern Thai. This percentage is probably a bit high, at least judging from the lexicons of the languages a century later, but not too far out of the range of lexical cognates between Southwestern and Central Taic languages. (Reportedly the percentage of cognates between Northern Thai and Tai Lü, of Xishuangbanna, is 88%, as these are more closely related historically than Nong and Northern Thai—Gordon 2005: [khb]).

To our knowledge, the first formal research into these languages was that carried out by research teams commissioned by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in the late 1950s. Phonemic inventories were first published in 1959 (Yan 1959, 1994), and phonological sketches, along with some lexical and grammatical observations of a dozen identified Zhuang languages (“vernaculars”), including the Nong and Dai Zhuang languages of Yunnan, were published by Wei and Tan in their Brief Overview of the Zhuang language (Zhuangyu Jianzhi, 1980, republished in Wang 1984).

A more extensive analysis, along with much of the data collected in the 1950s and on later research trips, is published in Zhang, Liang, Ouyang, Zheng, Li and Xie’s Zhuang Dialect Research (Zhuangyu Fangyan Yanjiu, 1999). This work includes a 1465-word wordlist with data collected from 37 locations, as well as phonological, lexical and some grammatical analysis, isogloss maps, a description of the nationally approved orthography and some texts in the Yongbei Zhuang language as spoken in Wuming County, Guangxi, which has been chosen as the standard variety for government-sponsored development.

Zhang (Junru) had previously explored the phonological implications of the aberrant Dai Zhuang language in a 1987 article published in the Chinese linguistic journal Minzu Yuwei, entitled “The Phonological Development of Wenma Zhuang” [Zhuangyu Wenma Tuyu de Yinlei Yanbian]. In the same journal, Dai Yong focused on the semantics of the range of the Dai Zhuang word mei6, as spoken in Wenshan County in a 1996 article: “Discussion of the semantic range and usage of mei6 in the Wenma Zhuang dialect” [Tantan Zhuangyu Wenma Tuyu Mei-6 de Yuyi ji Yongfa]. For an English-reading audience, Edmondson examines the phonological relationships among the Zhuang languages in his 1994 article “Change and Variation in Zhuang,” based on published and unpublished Chinese, Vietnamese and other sources.

The Yunnan Provincial Gazetteer (Yunnan Sheng Zhi 1998) and the Wenshan Zhuang and Miao Autonomous Prefecture Gazetteer (Zhang 2000) include some brief linguistic descriptions and wordlists of the Nong and Dai languages, as well as Wenshan’s Yezi Zhuang varieties. The Funing County Ethnicities Gazetteer (Lu and Nong 1998) includes brief wordlists of a half dozen Funing Zhuang varieties (Tianbao, Buxiong, Bu’ao, Buli, Buyei, Long’an as well as the Buyang language), the first three of which appear to be Central Taic.

Thai linguists Kullavanijaya and L-Thongkum (1998) completed an extensive survey of Taic ethnic groups of southern China, Laos, Vietnam and Thailand, investigating both the languages and the women’s costumes of various Tai-Kadai groups. Their sampling of Yunnan Central Taic languages (and others) is the most extensive to date, including 32 locations in Wenshan Prefecture. In Wenshan and Maguan counties, they collected Dai Zhuang data from three different sites (identified as “Mata,” “Thu” and “Budai” in their data); in Funing County, they were the first to our knowledge to note the unique Taic language of Min Zhuang (labeled “Kon Min,” the word kon (kwn), like bu/pu/phu, indicates ‘people’ or
as well as Tianbao (Tienbao) and several Yezi Zhuang datapoints (“Bu To”, “Hun Yai’ and “Bu Sha/Bu Yai” in their labeling); and they also sampled Nong Zhuang locations in Maguan, Wenshan and Mengzi counties. Unfortunately, most of the data they collected is not yet published or otherwise publicly available, to our knowledge, though a summary of the project with a list of datapoints appears in their 1998 article “Linguistic Criteria for Determining Tai Ethnic Groups: Case Studies on Central and Southwestern Tais,” and implications of the conserved voicing of Maguan County’s Dai Zhuang is discussed in L-Thongkum’s 1997 article “Proto-Voiced Plosives and Fricatives in Dai Tho.” Their phonological analysis of the Central Taic languages and proposed sub classification will be discussed in more detail in the following section on comparative phonology.

Pelkey, Wang and Johnson briefly discuss the historical relationship between the Nong Zhuang and Azhe Yi of Wenshan County and the effect of that contact on the phonology of Azhe in their unpublished 2005 article, which was presented at the 38th International Conference on Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics in Xiamen, China.

Presented at the same conference, Fine’s article “Variation within Southern Zhuang” reanalyses data from Zhang et al. 1999 in her brief article and proposes a more detailed historical-comparative classification for the Southern Zhuang (Central Taic) languages of China. (Fine 2005) Specifically, Fine argues for an early division between her “West Central Tai” group and the Yongnan group based on different sets of shared innovations. She also shows that the previously identified “Zuojiang vernacular” in fact contains differing varieties that do not share all the same innovations—the Zhuang varieties of Zuojiang and Longzhou share some innovations not shared by the Chongzuo and Ningming varieties, and in fact, Chongzuo seems to fit better into the Yongnan subdivision (along with Shangsi, etc.) than into the West Central Tai subdivision. Within the Yongnan group, Fusui and Long’an appear to be the most innovative phonologically, whereas the Zhuang varieties of the other Yongnan datapoints (Yongning, Qinzhou, Shangsi) only share a limited number of innovations with the Fusui and Long’an group. While Fine’s conclusions do not directly alter the classification of the Yunnan Central Taic varieties (“Wen-Ma” Dai Zhuang and Yan-Guang” Nong Zhuang still remain distinct dialect groups under her West Central Tai group), her paper does indicate that the Guangxi Central Taic situation is probably more complicated than just the three “vernaculars” (De-Jing, Zuojiang and Yongnan) indicated by Wei and Tan 1980 and Zhang et al. 1999. In terms of mutually intelligible languages, Fine’s paper indicates the possibility of six or more “Southern Zhuang” languages in Guangxi, in addition to the Yunnan varieties.

In recent years, a number of large works have been completed in Chinese, focusing on the Zhuang nationality, their culture and their languages, but as the majority of China’s Zhuang nationality live in Guangxi Province, many of these works ignore or only mention in passing the Central Taic-speaking Zhuang of Yunnan. However, just in the past several years several impressive works focusing particularly on the Zhuang peoples and cultures of Yunnan have been published (in Chinese), though these do not deal extensively with linguistics. For more information on the cultures, dress, agriculture, history and religion of Yunnan’s Zhuang, the reader is directed to The Culture of the Zhuang (Zhuangzu Wenhua, Dai 2004), Wenshan Prefecture Zhuang Nationality Traditional Culture Research (Wenshan Zhou Zhuang Zu Chuantong Wenhua Diaocha, 2004), Gazetteer of Wenshan Zhuang and Miao Autonomous Prefecture’s Ethnic Groups (Wenshan Zhuang Zu Miao Zu Zizhi Zhou Minzu Zhi, Wenshan Min-Zong Wei 2005), “Meng Lao Ship Ni Gu”: The General Introduction to the Culture of the Zhuang People (Dai and He 2006, this volume has some English content). Huang and Wang’s Babao Customs and Legends (Babao Fengqing yu Chuanshou, 2000) provides a number of Yunnan Zhuang legends, translated into Chinese. He, Lu and Meng’s 2004 Annotated Translations of Zhuang Epic Poetry (Zhuangzu Jingshi Yizhu) includes long poems transcribed phonetically (using the International Phonetic Alphabet) from each of the major Yunnan Zhuang languages, with Chinese word-for-word and idiomatic translations.
2 Intelligibility Research

2.1 Introduction

When we began the Yunnan Southern Zhuang Dialect research project in 2005, we had a goal of providing more information to help determine a reference dialect for Yunnan Southern Zhuang. In our research proposal we wrote:

The dialects and subdialects of Zhuang are numerous, and the degree of intelligibility among them has a great deal of variation. In the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, the Northern Zhuang dialect of Yongbei as spoken in Wuming County serves as the reference dialect (communication center). At present, in Yunnan there is also an unofficial reference dialect: the Nong Zhuang language (i.e. the Yan-Guang vernacular)…but to our knowledge there has not been much research into the degrees of intelligibility among different dialects and subdialects, and the subjective impressions of native speakers as to their understanding of related dialects varies widely. It remains to research objectively which Zhuang dialect(s) is recognized as “standard” and/or has the highest prestige. Through research into the intelligibility of Wenshan’s Southern Zhuang dialects, we hope to determine which subdialect would be able to serve as a standard dialect for Yunnan’s Southern Zhuang speakers…which can be used for the further development of the economic and cultural development of the speakers....

To this end, in addition to transcribing and recording lists of basic vocabulary and interviewing local community leaders, we also conducted dialect intelligibility testing, by means of recorded text tests (RTTs). After briefly reviewing previous research on intelligibility among these language varieties, we will explain the intelligibility methodology testing employed, and then summarize the findings.

2.2 Previous Intelligibility Research

While various anecdotal comments about intelligibility within linguistic literature on the Zhuang languages exist, to our knowledge there has been little empirical research on the intelligibility among the so-called “subdialects” or “vernaculars” (tuyu, 土语) of Southern Zhuang.

The Ethnic Research Department of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences has produced a massive work on language use among China’s minority language groups which includes a chapter on Wenshan Prefecture (CASS 1994:573–576). This article recognizes three Zhuang subgroups within the prefecture, identified by their autonyms: “Nong (侬),” “bu Yai (布雅依)” and “Dai (岱) / bu Tu (布土).” Population estimates from the 1982 census are provided: 400,000 Nong, 300,000 Yai and 90,000 Dai Zhuang. The article explains that Nong speak the Yan-Guang subdialect of Southern Zhuang, the Dai/Tu use the Wen-Ma dialect of Southern Zhuang, whereas the Yai speak both the Qiubei and the Guibian subdialects of Northern Zhuang. Intelligibility between the Nong and Yai is “difficult,” and between Nong and Dai/Tu is “more difficult, it is necessary to use Chinese to communicate.”
2.3 RTT Methodology

The RTT methodology was devised by members of SIL Mexico Branch and described in Casad’s book *Dialect Intelligibility Testing* (1974). This work was based on earlier work by Voegelin and Harris, and Crawford. Recorded text testing has been widely used by SIL International in many countries throughout the world and is recognised as a valuable tool in assessing dialect intelligibility. The methods used in the Yunnan Southern Zhuang Dialect survey differ in many points from those of Casad however.\(^{34}\)

Though one of us (ECJ) had some familiarity with RTT intelligibility testing, having used this instrument in research projects in several African countries, for all of us, this was our first experience using this instrument in rural China. Therefore the intelligibility testing was a learning process for us, and during the course of the research we discovered the need to modify the methodology to fit local conditions.

2.3.1 Overview of RTT Intelligibility Testing

Recorded text tests (RTTs) are a tool to test intelligibility between related dialects (we only used RTT testing with respect to Southern Zhuang speakers’ ability to understand closely related Southern Zhuang dialects; we did not directly test participants’ comprehension of Chinese or Northern Zhuang dialects). An RTT is a short text recorded by a speaker of dialect A which is then played to a speaker of dialect B. Questions about the content of the text are formulated. Speakers of dialect B with no prior exposure to dialect A listen to the dialect and respond to the content questions, allowing the researchers to determine the level of basic intelligibility that speakers of dialect B would normally have when hearing dialect A without an acquired comprehension through previous exposure.

In some circles, it has been common to use the word “intelligibility” when referring to the level of basic understanding that is a result of the linguistic similarity between two closely related dialects, that is “inherent understanding” due to similar grammar, lexicon and phonology that every native speaker of the dialect can be assumed to possess, regardless of whether they have had any exposure to the other dialect (that is, opportunity to hear and learn the other dialect). So, by this definition, intelligibility is a characteristic of the dialect(s) in question, not a characteristic of the population of speakers, and therefore it can be tested by careful selection of very small samples of unexposed mother tongue speakers.

“Comprehension,” on the other hand, has often been used to refer to acquired understanding of a language that may or may not be closely related to the mother tongue of the speakers. This understanding is a result of extended contact with speakers of the tested language variety and does not necessarily have any relation to the linguistic (historic) similarities between the two language varieties. Thus “comprehension” by this definition is a feature of the population of speakers in question, not of the language itself, and only through careful sampling (ideally random well-done sampling) can the results be said to represent the entire population in question. Also, comprehension results would often be conditional upon and/or correlative to other variables, such as age, location, education level, employment, sex, etc. We recognize that often this dichotomy between “inherent intelligibility” and “acquired comprehension” is too simplistic to describe the sociolinguistic situation of a multilingual society, such as that of the Yunnan Southern Zhuang. (cf. Milliken and Milliken 1996) Some understanding of other dialects or languages is partially a result of historical linguistic relatedness and partly a result of exposure. Related languages are normally more easily learned than non-related languages. And differences, especially phonological differences, between related languages are often systematic, so that even when those differences are too great to allow for instant understanding upon first hearing, often speakers can start to internalize those changes upon repeated exposure and understand a different, but related, language without having to

\(^{34}\) For an example of a survey conducted in China that made use of Casad’s original methodology, see Bai Dialect Survey (Allen 2004). We are indebted to Allen for portions of the methodology summary presented here.
slowly learn it as a student must study a language completely unrelated to their own. Even Zhuang and Chinese, which are certainly not closely related, if related at all, do exhibit a large number of cognate words, presumably from past borrowing from medieval (or earlier) Chinese forms, so speakers who possess command of several Chinese “dialects” such as Cantonese and Hakka may more quickly be able to recognize Zhuang words, and likewise, Zhuang who speak several Zhuang dialects or languages may more quickly understand Chinese dialects which differ from standard Mandarin.

Nonetheless, for the purposes of this survey, we have focused our intelligibility testing on trying to identify the basic “inherent” intelligibility among Yunnan Southern Zhuang dialects in order to determine whether there are natural boundaries between these dialects based on intelligibility. Many researchers conducting similar intelligibility testing have tried to extract exact statistical results. For example: speakers of dialect B on average, scored 88% on a test from dialect A, with a standard deviation of 11.4, therefore the intelligibility of dialect A to speakers of dialect B is 81% to 95%. This score, or range of scores, is then compared to speakers of dialect B’s scores on tests for dialects C, D, and E, and/or the scores of speakers of dialect B on the dialect A test are compared to the scores of speakers of dialects C, D, and E on the same test, and so on. The assumptions the researchers must maintain to claim that average test scores are a direct representation of the percentage of intelligibility is that the recorded tests for dialects A, B, C, D and so on are all of equal difficulty, and that each question on each test is also of equal difficulty. So if a given RTT test has 10 questions, each question represents ten percentage points, and no question ought to be more difficult than another. (Sometimes statistical comparisons of results have then been further used to create Venn diagrams showing the number of standard dialects needed to guarantee “adequate” intelligibility on the part of all speakers at various thresholds of adequacy, e.g. if 90% intelligibility is required, then x standard dialects are required, etc.)

We feel that these assumptions are untenable. A score of 80% of a given RTT is not directly comparable to a score of 80% of a different RTT as it cannot be established that the two RTTs are of equal complexity. Many variables such as content, recording quality, testing environment, choice of questions, characteristics of the person administering the text, etc., could be conflicting variables. Even when not comparing multiple RTTs but rather simply testing speakers’ intelligibility of one potential standard dialect, numerical test scores on an RTT test cannot be assumed to be a numerical representation of the degree of intelligibility, because the various questions within the RTT cannot be assumed to be of equal similarity. Finally our comprehension questions, usually constructed with quite limited understanding of the structures of the speech varieties in question cannot be assumed to adequately represent all the characteristics of the languages or even all the potential systematic differences between related dialects.

However, we do feel that recorded text testing is still a defensible measure of basic comprehension, and a combination of direct questioning about speakers’ perceptions of intelligibility of related dialects is much stronger when supplemented by basic RTT testing results. Discussing how a speaker or group of speakers understand a related variety is much more fruitful when they have just heard a text in that variety than in the abstract, when sometimes the researcher cannot be sure that she and the participants are even referring to the same speech variety! (For example, Nong Zhuang speakers outside of Guangnan County often have widely varying perceptions about whether or not they can understand Nong from Guangnan County, probably due to the fact that there are large populations of both Northern and Southern Zhuang speakers in Guangnan, but both Northern and Southern Zhuang speakers in Guangnan dress similarly and are part of the same Zhuang nationality group.)

Therefore we conducted limited RTT intelligibility testing, but analyzed the results of the intelligibility testing according to a scale of three categories:
Adequate intelligibility: Speakers can, upon first hearing, basically understand all the content and follow the story’s plot line (sufficiently to derive meaning and enjoyment from it). Speakers whose intelligibility we evaluated as “adequate” normally were able to answer at least 85% of the content questions correctly. In a face-to-face situation, speakers feel they could adequately negotiate meaning with a speaker of the dialect in question.

Inadequate intelligibility: Speakers, upon first hearing, recognize that the variety is related to their own and can pick out details here and there, but are unable to follow the basic plot. Though these speakers might be able to answer a content question here or there, the majority of the content they either recite inaccurately or cannot understand at all. In a face-to-face situation, speakers would normally switch to local Chinese (local dialects of Southwest Mandarin Chinese serve as the trade language for the Yunnan Southern Zhuang area), assuming they both control enough Chinese to accomplish their objectives. Though normally speakers would not be inclined to listen further to dialects they can only understand in part, given the proper motivation and exposure it is possible that speakers could acquire comprehension relatively quickly, if the differences are primarily phonological and systematic.

No intelligibility: Speakers understand nothing from the text and, upon first hearing, do not perceive the recording to be a dialect of their language. Often they are unwilling to listen to the story in its entirety, or they start other conversations during the listening due to boredom. Speakers would be unlikely to acquire comprehension quickly as they do not even understand enough to start identifying parts of the sentence, making comparisons to their own pronunciation, etc.

2.3.2 Selection of Locations for RTT Recordings

From the beginning of the survey, we knew that Nong Zhuang (speakers of the so-called “Yan-Guang” vernacular) and Dai Zhuang (speakers of the so-called “Wen-Ma” vernacular) are perceived locally as speaking two quite different languages. Historically, these two speaker populations were considered by Chinese historians to belong to two different ethnic groups (the Nong people and the Tulao people, respectively), and wordlists collected by linguists in the 1950s showed these two language varieties to be quite different phonologically. Therefore, from the beginning we felt it unlikely that Nong Zhuang and Dai Zhuang would prove to be mutually intelligible. We therefore chose several locations within each of these speech communities to prepare RTT texts.

In early interviews with local Zhuang experts (including one of the research team, Mr. Wang, who is a mother tongue speaker of Nong Zhuang from Xichou County and has researched Zhuang culture for twenty years), it became apparent that there is no single perceived cultural center for the Nong Zhuang. There are large concentrations of Nong in Guangnan, Yanshan and Wenshan counties, as well as smaller populations in Xichou, Maguan, Malipo and Funing counties. (There are also close to 40,000 Nong Zhuang in Mengzi County in Honghe Prefecture, but apparently these Nong have mostly switched to using Chinese as their first language, according to the Mengzi County Minority Affairs Commission.) Therefore we selected three locations know to have the highest concentrations of Nong Zhuang in each of these three counties:

1. Milewan Village, Binglie District, Wenshan County
2. Kuaxi Village, Zhela District, Yanshan County
3. Shangfazao Village, Zhetu District, Guangnan County.

The Dai Zhuang have a smaller population and geographical spread, living primarily in Wenshan, western Yanshan and Maguan counties, with some villages in Malipo, Guangnan and Kaiyuan County (of Honghe Prefecture). Though the villages within Kaihua and Panzhuhua townships, directly outside (and now being encompassed by) the Wenshan Prefecture government city, are the most visible and famous Dai Zhuang villages, in visiting two of these villages (Shuichezhai and Niutouzhai) we discovered that only the older Dai people in this area still speak Dai Zhuang—virtually all the people under 30 years of age have switched to speaking only Chinese (though some can still understand Dai). Therefore we concluded that the Dai dialect of this area, though convenient, would not make a good reference dialect. However, there is an area starting from Matang Township, north of the Wenshan County seat, and going up into western Yanshan’s Pingyuan Township, and west to the Township of Zhongheying in Kaiyuan County. Dai Zhuang in several different areas (including far away areas in Maguan and Guangnan) indicated that they perceive this area to be the original Dai Zhuang homeland, and many Dai Zhuang believe their ancestors came from there and some still have relatives in this area. So we recorded an RTT text in the Dai village of Xiaominghu, in Dehou Township, right in the middle of this area. (This village is in Wenshan County, but very close geographically to the Dai areas in Yanshan County, with frequent contact, being almost equidistant to the towns of Kaihua [Wenshan county seat] and Pingyuan [the largest town in western Yanshan].) We also recorded an RTT in eastern Maguan County, as there are a number of Dai villages in the eastern Maguan/western Malipo area; however we found there to be little difference in the wordlists and only ended up testing this RTT among the Dai in Guangnan County.

1. Xiaominghu village, Dehou Township, Wenshan County

2. Laochang village, Nanlao Township, Maguan County

Finally, although the differences between Dai and Nong Zhuang were widely acknowledged both by local Zhuang and in previous linguistic works (cf. Zhang et al. 1999, Thomkum, Edmondson, etc.), there was little awareness locally of the relationship between the Southern Zhuang of Guangxi Region and those of Yunnan. If Yunnan Zhuang go to Guangxi, normally they go to urban centers such as Nanning, Baise or Guilin, not normally to the rural southern Zhuang areas. Though Lu and Nong (1998) claim that the Guangxi southern Zhuang varieties Yang Zhuang (the so-called “De-Jing subdialect”), Zuojiang Zhuang and Yongnan Zhuang are spoken in Funing, it provides no information on intelligibility among these varieties and Nong Zhuang. Based on the 1950s wordlists presented in Zhang et al 1999 and the analysis in Wei and Tan 1980, of the researched Southern Zhuang languages of Guangxi, the Yang Zhuang language (“De-Jing subdialect”) appeared the most similar to the Nong Zhuang of Yunnan. No Guangxi variety appears similar to Dai Zhuang, though there are a small number of speakers of Dai Zhuang or at least a very similar variety in Northern Vietnam (cf. Edmondson et al 2000). Therefore we decided to record an RTT in the Yang Zhuang language, as spoken in the Jingxi county seat.

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35 We initially also recorded a Nong RTT in the largest single Nong village in Yunnan Province, Xiaoguangnan Village, in Liancheng Township of Guangnan County. However, as RTT analysis showed some unusual phonology, notably a merger of the /l/ and /r/ phonemes, we decided that the Xiaoguangnan dialect would not likely serve as a good reference dialect for most Nong and we did not pilot test or administer this RTT.

36 In fact, we discovered there was remarkably little dialectal variation between the Dai of Maguan and Wenshan and the Dai of Maguan told us that at least some of their ancestors had come from northern Wenshan county six or seven generations before. Interestingly though, the women’s traditional dress is quite different.
2.3.3 Preparation of the RTT Recordings

A speaker was selected to record a short text in his or her own dialect. We picked speakers who seemed to be fairly typical speakers of the dialect with no speech defects. We picked speakers who had spoken the dialect in question as their first language since early childhood, raised by parents who were both speakers of the same dialect in a village or town where the dialect in question was the primary language used. The speaker was asked to record a short story based on personal experience. We did not record folk tales, as versions of these are often widely known across dialect groups and familiarity with the basic plot could affect scores, either by listeners who understand poorly being able to recount the plot nonetheless, or because a local version of the story differs in key details and listeners might retell their version, rather than the version they heard on the recording. We also asked story-tellers to avoid Chinese loanwords as much as possible and well-known place names (as this could prejudice speakers against trying to understand, e.g. “he said he’s from Guangnan, I can’t understand people from there.”) Most of the stories were between three and six minutes in length. We recorded stories with content detailed enough so that we were able to construct at least twenty content questions from the text.

Recordings were made with a portable Sony Minidisc recorder, in uncompressed Wave Sound files (wav) format, using an external microphone. Recording levels were adjusted manually for each speaker to obtain the best level in each case and record as little ambient noise from the environment as possible (most recordings were completed in village situations).

The audio recording was then manually divided into breath groups, usually no more than five seconds long (the minidisc recorder allows for original track to be divided into dozens or hundreds of tracks). Then, with the help of the speaker or another speaker of that dialect, a phrase by phrase translation into Chinese was made. On the basis of the Chinese translation, at least 20 questions were devised in Chinese to test comprehension of the story. Care was taken to devise questions that covered as wide a range of semantic areas as possible. Yes/no questions were not permitted, as well as questions that required intuition or inference, or that required multiple answers or personal opinions. Only one question per track was required and, of course, some tracks had no questions, as we tried not to divide logical “sentences,” even if there was a breath break. We would then pilot test these questions with several other speakers in the same village (or town) who had not previously heard the story, to ensure that the story recording quality, translation accuracy and clarity of questions were adequate. Because the majority of Yunnan Southern Zhuang speakers can understand at least some Mandarin and/or local Chinese, we were usually able to test the questions through Chinese. We would play the story in its entirely one time, then replay the story, stopping after each track for which we had devised a content question, and then ask the listener the question in standard Mandarin or local Chinese, depending on that person’s Chinese abilities. The listener was told to answer the question either in Chinese (Mandarin or local dialect) or their Zhuang dialect, if they felt more comfortable. If the answer was not clearly correct or clearly incorrect, we would record the answer for later evaluation, so as to be consistent in our evaluations. During the pilot-testing...
phase, any question that any listener from the same village as the story teller had difficulty in answering was eliminated, resulting in a minimum of ten questions for each test.40

2.3.4 Administering the RTT Intelligibility Tests

In each location where we did intelligibility testing, potential RTT participants were first invited to participate, after we introduced ourselves, explained our research, told them under whose authority we were conducting the research, what the results of the research would be, etc. If participants then chose to participate, we asked them a series of questions designed to screen out any potential listeners who did not speak the dialect in question as their first and strongest language or had excessive exposure to other Zhuang dialects through marriage, kinship, time spent studying or working in other areas, etc. Subjects were asked to listen first to the RTT recorded in their own area or in the dialect the most similar to their own dialect (based on wordlist comparisons—we always transcribed the wordlists before beginning RTT testing).41 Assuming that the participant understood that story well, she or he was then invited to listen to other stories. (Usually subjects who made it through the pre-screening questions had no intelligibility difficulties with the first “hometown” RTT, but we wanted to check for any hearing or attention span difficulties that could bias the other results.)

Though our original goal was to test several people individually in each of the areas where we chose to do intelligibility testing (along the lines of Casad 1974, as Allen and Zhang did in Allen 2004), we discovered during the course of the survey that testing individuals, with no other potential listeners sitting around (so as to avoid their hearing the earlier participants’ responses) is very unnatural in Zhuang culture. Zhuang culture, like many others, is a collective culture, where family and community are extremely important. Taking one person aside and putting on headphones is abnormal. So during the course of the testing we often ended up testing participants in small groups, still using headphones, to help screen out background village noises and encourage participants to concentrate on the story, but testing two to four people at a time (by use of earphone plug splitters).42 Then we would encourage the listeners to take turns answering the questions. If it was a dialect they understood adequately, often listeners were so eager to answer that more than one would answer simultaneously, and we could be assured that the intelligibility was shared by all, not just one speaker. (Also, we had already screened out those who might have higher comprehension due to previous exposure.)

Casad’s version of the RTT method relies upon a set of specific content-related questions, asked of speakers in their own mother tongue dialect through recordings interspersed with sections of the story. From the beginning we decided to try to pose these questions live, rather than through recordings, and in

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40 We did not seek to reduce the number of questions down to only ten questions per test, as we were not planning to statistically compare the scores on different tests. Our tests varied widely in length, which we felt was reflective of natural story-telling, and playing back long stretches with no questions can cause confusion or cause listeners to stop listening attentively, so we deemed it better to use every question that had survived the pilot testing, even if that meant having 25 questions (e.g. the Xiaomingfu Dai Zhuang RTT)! Though this makes the testing phase quite laborious, it does hopefully give us a more reliable picture of intelligibility than a smaller number of questions, more vulnerable to “lucky guesses” or unfortunately gaps in attention.

41 In the kwn Min Zhuang group of southern Funing, this was not possible as we had recorded no RTT in a dialect very similar to theirs. Before arriving in Balong village and beginning the research, we were under the impression that they were part of the Nong Zhuang group, and we expected the dialect to be similar to the Nong of Malipo or Guangnan. To our knowledge, no researcher has previously noticed this Southern Zhuang language group, which appears to be significantly different from both Nong Zhuang to the east and Yang Zhuang to the east.

42 Also, because in each village location, we had to be chaperoned by at least one member of the local government, at times our research time in the village was quite limited and we only had time to test a few carefully-screened individuals.
Mandarin or local Chinese dialect. We chose this method rather than the traditional Casad method of recording the questions themselves in the local Zhuang dialect of the listeners for several reasons: Firstly, as mentioned, the majority of Yunnan Zhuang people can understand at least some basic Chinese. As all the researchers could speak Chinese, this reduced the complexity of the testing. Secondly, as none of the researchers spoke all the Zhuang dialects being studied, had we translated the Chinese questions back into Zhuang and recorded them, we would have no means of verifying the accuracy of the translations of the questions (nor the clarity of their recordings). Though the pilot-testing of the texts would hopefully catch any inaccuracies in the translation of the text itself and also any unclearly worded questions, we could think of no method to check the quality of various different translations of the questions in each location where we tested the texts. Although by asking the questions directly in Chinese, we did run the risk of a participant we perceived to understand Chinese not understanding the question itself well (and therefore responding incorrectly), we eliminated the risk of mistranslated questions asking respondents for a different answer than we anticipated. Thirdly, when the Johnsons had previously used the traditional Casad method (of interspersing recorded questions with the story on the recording itself) in other countries, respondents were often confused by the questions, having difficulty separating the story from the questions themselves, especially if the sex of the story-teller and that of the question-asker was the same. Though the formula of a section of story followed by a recorded question and a pause for an answer may feel very natural to Western, urban audiences used to standardized testing, it seemed to be quite unnatural for rural farmers with limited formal education. Finally, we view intelligibility testing primarily as a human interaction, not a scientific experiment. We viewed the participants we worked with as new friends, not as “test subjects.” Therefore, being able to say, “I’d like to play you a story and then ask you some questions about it” and then asking those questions directly face to face felt much more friendly and culturally appropriate. Often participants naturally fell into the role of translating for a non-Zhuang-speaking friend, as presumably they have reason to do when an ethnically Han or Miao or Yi friend visits their village.

Though initially we envisioned a question and response method of administering the test, and therefore we pilot-tested the RTT texts that way, we soon discovered that in the Zhuang area, similar as in other areas, giving a single word or single phrase response to a specific question is not the most natural way to carry out this intelligibility testing. When speakers understood the recording well, and as they warmed to the idea of listening to the recordings, they often did not wait for the researcher’s question at the pause in the story but quickly translated the entire content of the preceding segment into Chinese (or their local dialect, if they did not feel comfortable in Chinese). In order to reduce tension, the researchers initially had encouraged the participants not to view this as a “test.” Though we call it a “recorded text test” in this article, in the village we always strove to avoid the word “test” entirely, preferring instead to invite participants to “listen to a story.” Except for some young people who had recently been students, most participants did not seem inclined to treat it as a question-and-answer “test” situation, but they naturally took on the role of translators, explaining the story to us in local Chinese, as though we did not understand the story ourselves. This served our objective of determining their intelligibility level as well or better than asking for specific isolated bits of information, as we got a more complete picture of their understanding of the story. (We tried to be sensitive to any difficulties participants had in expressing their thoughts in Chinese, and encouraged them to explain to our Zhuang-speaking partner if they felt unable to adequately express a thought in Chinese.) However, we had already completed the pilot-testing of the recordings using the traditional question-and-answer approach. Therefore, though we did not discourage people from retelling the story, section by section, we still evaluated their comprehension in terms of the specific questions and answers that had been pilot tested, and should they fail to mention the sought-after detail in a retelling, we would then ask the prepared question and make sure that they had understood that detail correctly.
Retelling methods of intelligibility testing have been found to be more culturally natural in other areas as well, and SIL International linguist Angela Kluge (Kluge 2005) has devised a method for pilot-testing texts that involves identifying all the information units that a hometown audience not only understands but views as salient (any bit of information that is missed by any or a significant part of the pilot testers is not required of listeners of other dialects). In cultures similar to those of the Zhuang, we would recommend following a methodology similar to Kulge’s from the beginning.

Correct answers were accorded a point, incorrect answers zero points. (While testing in the village, the researchers marked answers “Y” for correct and “N” for incorrect so as to not allow on-lookers to deduce the score and declare the listener as having “failed” or “passed.”) When the listener provided an answer that was neither clearly correct nor incorrect, that answer would be recorded for later evaluation. Although we sought to use only questions that required a single answer, nonetheless, we sometimes discovered in testing that respondents would provide an answer that demonstrated that they clearly understood the key phrase in part, but not fully. For these answers we would accord a half point.

The people chosen to listen to the recordings were not chosen to fit any particular sampling scheme, as we were investigating inherent intelligibility, which is a feature of the linguistic relationship of the dialects in question, not a feature of the population. As mentioned before, we were more concerned with finding participants with no prior exposure to the dialect in question and ideally little exposure to other Zhuang dialects as well (as being exposed to related dialects other than their own might make it easier for them to adjust to other related varieties than someone who had always only heard her mother tongue dialect). In some areas it was not possible to find those with no exposure to other dialects, e.g. in Zhetu District of Guangnan, there are speakers of both Nong Southern Zhuang and Yei Northern Zhuang (“Guibian Vernacular”), and probably almost all Dai Zhuang have been exposed to Nong Zhuang at some point in their lives (as the Nong are at least four times more numerous and also have villages in all the Dai Zhuang areas). Participants were selected through all sorts of means—when in villages, we were usually assisted by a local leader, such as the village head or party chief or a school principal. We also tested some local friends and relatives of friends. Though we did not actively try to balance the sample for sex or age, we did usually have both men and women and some people as young as teenagers (with parental or teacher permission) and others in their 70s. In some villages it was difficult to find young people, as some villages seem to be inhabited largely by people over 35 or under 12, due to teenagers and young adults leaving the village to study (some students start living in dormitories away from parents from the age of five) or work, sometimes in white collar government or business jobs but often as unskilled laborers in the endless factories of eastern China. However, we also tested some young friends living in Wenshan and Guangnan county seats. With the very limited sampling that we did do, we were able to observe that, as expected, the results did not differ significantly by age or gender, and the intelligibility-based language groupings were quite clear regardless of whether they were female or male speakers, young or old speakers.43

Because discussing differences between dialects is more profitable having just heard the dialect in question than just discussing dialect differences in the abstract, we also followed up each RTT with three questions (Radloff 1993a):

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43 The Kuaxi RTT was told by an older lady, and a few young listeners did comment on the fact that she talked “like my grandma” and that she used “more polite, formal phrases, that younger people rarely use”. Nevertheless, the young people that said these things understood her story almost perfectly. Our Zhetu Nong RTT was told by a very young man, aged 19 at the time of the telling, but no old people expressed any difficulty or disapproval of his speech due to his youthfulness. Also, Zhetu Nong seems to be more conservative in general, so though surely age is a sociolinguistic variable for the Nong as for most language communities, probably geographical variation is more significant still.
1. Where do you think the person who told that story is from?

2. How much of the story you just heard did you understand: everything, most, some, a little or nothing?

3. Does the story teller speak the same way you do? If not the same, are the differences large or small?

Of course, these are very subjective questions, and one speaker’s estimation of what constitutes “large differences” may be quite different from that of the next speaker due to many factors. Nonetheless, these questions helped us to see how much awareness listeners have of regional dialect differences, how sensitive they are to those differences and see if there is a dichotomy between their measured intelligibility through their response to the content questions and their perceived intelligibility.

### 2.3.5 Potential Conflicting Variables

In interpreting the results of the intelligibility testing, it is important to consider any possible conflicting variables that could affect the participants’ responses. Allen (2004) list a number of these possible variables: nervousness, test taking ability, peer pressure, linguistic ability, memory and attentiveness attitudes. While we feel that moving toward a more conversational, group-oriented method of intelligibility testing as we tried to do reduces the effects of nervousness, test taking ability and peer pressure, it is harder to control for linguistic ability, memory and attentiveness and attitude. Even though most of our RTT participants lived in rural villages, most are relatively busy people with various demands on their time, including children, local government responsibilities, agriculture and marketing. It was not uncommon for testing to be interrupted by a cell phone or visitor. Of course, we did our best to try to make sure listeners heard the recordings clearly and concentrated on the content, within the bounds of friendship and courtesy.

### 2.4 Intelligibility Testing Results

#### 2.4.1 Nong Zhuang and Dai Zhuang: No Single Reference Dialect

Though early on we did try to test some Nong subjects in Dai Zhuang and vice-versa, we quickly confirmed our starting hypothesis that these are two very different, mutually unintelligible languages. (The wordlist results do not lead one to expect much inherent intelligibility!) Though there are some Dai Zhuang who can understand Nong, this is due to exposure, as the Nong are more numerous in every county where the Dai live.\(^4\) Though speakers of these two languages have both been classified as “Zhuang” since 1958, and these are clearly both Taic languages, historically they have been seen both by Han and by themselves as two different ethnic groups. The Dai often refer to the Nong as “Zhuang,” in contrast to themselves. As explained in the sections on culture and history, though there are many cultural similarities, there are also many differences. The view held by many local people in Wenshan is that the Dai Zhuang are the oldest inhabitants of the Wenshan area, and the Nong Zhuang, though living in the area longer than most of the Han, Miao, Yi or Yao, probably came later, perhaps from the area of present day Guangxi, possibly during the time of Nong Zhigao and his Southern Heavenly Kingdom (Nan Tian Guo), during the Song dynasty, that is, 11th AD. So it is not surprising to find that the Nong Zhuang and Dai Zhuang cannot understand each other, and it is not possible for any single reference dialect to serve

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\(^4\) Except perhaps for Kaiyuan county, but reportedly the Dai there have switched to speaking primarily Chinese and that county was outside the boundaries of our research, not being within Wenshan Prefecture, our authorization being from the Wenshan Zhuang Studies Association.
these two groups. Though theoretically the Dai could learn a dialect of Nong relatively easily, being surrounded by Nong villages and speaking a language that is clearly related, in fact, all or almost all of the Dai speakers consider themselves to be bilingual in Chinese, and it is hard to imagine what would motivate them to do the work of learning Nong. As most of the Wenshan and Yanshan Nong also speak some Chinese, Dai Zhuang simply use Chinese when dealing with Nong Zhuang, as they do with Han, Miao, Yi and other ethnic groups in the area.

2.4.2 Dai Zhuang Internal Intelligibility

The Dai of northern Wenshan and Yanshan counties are known by locals as “Da Tou Tu” or “Piled-up Headdress Tu” for the wrapped dark blue turbans the women wear, those of Maguan and Malipo counties are known as “Jian Tou Tu” (“Pointy Headdress Tu”), and those of the areas right around Wenshan city in Kaihua and Panzhihua townships are known as “Ping Tou Tu” (“Flat Headdress Tu”). We had also heard the Guangnan Tu referred to as “Pian Tou Tu” (“Slanted Headdress Tu”) by someone in Wenshan; however, we did not hear that name used by anyone in Guangnan. Because of the variation in women’s costumes, we wondered whether we would find significant internal dialectal variation within Dai Zhuang. However, both of the previous wordlist results and intelligibility testing results pointed to remarkable similarity among the speech of Dai Zhuang of different areas, regardless of the differences in costumes.

Using the RTT test recorded in Xiaominghu Village, Dehou Township in northern Wenshan County, we tested groups of Dai Zhuang in Niutouzhai Village in Kaihua township of Wenshan County, Laochang Village in Nanlao township of Maguan County, and in Songshupo Village in Zhulin township of Guangnan County. Almost everyone tested in these three areas understood the test very well—usually only one or two answers (out of 25) were missed. One younger man in Laochang Village only answered about 60% of the questions correctly; we do not know if this was due to an inadequate knowledge of the Dai Zhuang language, which did not come out in the pre-RTT screening questions, lack of interest during the course of the rather long RTT text, or some other reason. In any case, the majority of Dai Zhuang seem to understand the northern Wenshan County Dai Zhuang quite easily.

We also tested some Guangnan Dai Zhuang using the Laochang Village recording, and they understood it quite well also, about equally as well as the Xiaominghu recording, though one participant (who got an almost perfect score) felt it was more difficult than the Xiaominghu text. Interestingly, speakers in all three locations were able to guess the general area from which the Xiaominghu RTT was recorded; all indicated locations in the area between Wenshan County’s Matang township to Yanshan County’s Pingyuan township. This may be due to this area’s reputation as the

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45 Though these names do not seem to be used by the Dai Zhuang themselves when speaking their own language, they do not seem to be pejorative names but just descriptive of the women’s headdress. “Tu” is interpreted to mean “local” or “indigenous people” and is also not perceived to be pejorative in Wenshan, though the cognate “Tho” is reportedly a pejorative for the related Tây nationality across the border in Northern Vietnam, and in modern Mandarin to call someone “hèn tù, 很土” means one is very “rustic” or “old-fashioned” and is not particularly complimentary. The Northern Zhuang-speaking Yei (or bu Yae) peoples of Funing county are also referred to as “Tu” or “Tuzu” by the other Zhuang groups there, apparently also to acknowledge that these Zhuang may have been in the Funing area before the later migrations of Long’an, Tianbao and other Zhuang groups came into Funing from the Guangxi area.

46 This village was just outside the city of Wenshan. Already in the year since the testing, construction from the city has almost surrounded this village.

47 Many young Dai Zhuang people speak Chinese better than Dai, and an older Dai Zhuang participant in Guangnan did feel that while she understood the RTTs fine, younger people might have a harder time, as they spent much of their lives in a Chinese-speaking environment now.
homeland of the Dai Zhuang, as most respondents had little first-hand exposure to this dialect (though there was a family in Songshupo that had moved there from the Matang area, so everyone in Songshupo was exposed to some degree). The Guangnan Dai Zhuang who listened to the Laochang recording also perceived this story to come from the Maguan or Yanshan area, possibly indicating that they are only aware of Dai Zhuang in that area, not in other areas (there are less than a dozen Dai Zhuang villages in Guangnan, and they are quite scattered in other areas as well). All listeners felt that they understood the two recordings either completely or mostly. Some listeners said that the recordings’ dialects were exactly the same as theirs, some felt that there were differences, though not large, and one person felt that there were significant differences between her dialect and each of the other two.

2.4.3 Understanding of Guangxi Yang Zhuang among Yunnan’s Southern Zhuang

As 1950s wordlists (Zhang et al. 1999) showed that the Yang Zhuang (“De-Jing vernacular”) of Jingxi County, Guangxi, and the Dai Zhuang of Yunnan are extremely different phonologically and lexically, we did not test the Jingxi RTT recording among Dai Zhuang speakers. Since the Yang Zhuang and Nong Zhuang wordlists showed a much higher degree of similarity, and previous research on the Jingxi Yang Zhuang, such as [壮语简志、靖西壮语研究] also showed some shared grammatical features, we were eager to see whether Nong Zhuang of Yunnan had any comprehension of Jingxi County’s Yang Zhuang. Therefore, we tested understanding of the Jingxi County Yang Zhuang dialect in a number of Nong Zhuang locations: Kuaxi Village in Yanshan County’s Zhela District, Geji Village in Xichou County’s Xinjie Township, Naba Village in Guangnan County’s Zhetu District, Baituzhai Village in Wenshan County’s Binglie District, Xiaoguangnan in Guangnan County’s Liancheng Township, and Xiamugui Village in Funing County’s Muyang District. None of the Nong Zhuang people we tested were able to understand any of this recording. Many people were not willing to listen to the whole recording, as they could not understand anything. Some people thought the recording was a Yao language; others thought perhaps it was Northern Zhuang or Dai Zhuang; and some correctly guessed that it was some kind of Guangxi Zhuang.

As mentioned previously, upon beginning research in Funing County’s Balong Village (Tianbeng Township), we discovered that the Zhuang of this village do not call themselves “Nong,” but call themselves kwn Min (k\text{\text{\text{"}}}}₃₃\text{\text{\text{"}}}₃min⁴, or the “Min people.” Analysis of the wordlist recorded with them revealed that though their language was clearly a Southern Zhuang language (Central Tai, that is), it was quite different from Nong Zhuang, and also different from Yang Zhuang. When we tested Min Zhuang speakers on the Jingxi recording, they were able to understand no more than the Nong Zhuang—that is, nothing except for an occasional Chinese loanword.

However, in the same village, we happened upon a an older woman who was a member of Funing County’s “Tianbao” ([tʰjen³³pæul]) Zhuang group, originally from Funing County’s Dongbo District. “Tianbao” is an old name for modern day Debao County, next to Jingxi County in Guangxi, and the Funing County Nationalities Gazetteer (富宁县民族志) (1986) indicates that this Zhuang group immigrated to Funing from Tianbao/Debao County in Guangxi around the end of the Ming and beginning of the Qing dynasties. Since we knew that historically her group’s dialect was closely related to the Yang Zhuang language (“De-Jing vernacular”), we invited her to listen to the Jingxi recording. Though she was married to a Min Zhuang man and lived in the Min village of Balong for over twenty years, and according to the Gazetteer, her Tianbao group had been separated from the Debao Zhuang for centuries, she was able to correctly answer 65% of the 20 content questions for the Jingxi recording. Though we were only

48 Such as the fact that both Yang Zhuang and Nong Zhuang place the directional verbs (趋向动词) directly after the main verb, before the object, whereas other Zhuang languages place these verbs after the object, as does Chinese.
able to test this single Tianbao woman, as we did not have time to visit any Tianbao villages, the fact that she was still able to understand more than half of the Jingxi recording whereas no other Yunnan Southern Zhuang speaker was able to understand anything at all indicates the need for further research into the relationship between Funing’s Tianbao and the Yang Zhuang language spoken in Guangxi’s Jingxi, Debao and Napo counties. The Gazetteer also mentions a Zhuang group in Funing called “bu Xiong (布雄),” who it claims migrated to Funing from Napo and Jingxi counties (of modern day Guangxi) during the Qing dynasty and settled in Banlun, Xinhua, and Guichao, with a minority ending up in Dongbo and Ayong districts. So the Xiong Zhuang of Funing may also still speak a dialect that belongs to the Yang Zhuang language of Guangxi. Further research into Funing’s Southern Zhuang groups should be coordinated with Southern Zhuang dialect research in Guangxi (and ideally Northern Vietnam).

2.4.4 Nong Zhuang Internal Intelligibility

As the wordlist comparisons in the Comparative Phonology section show, within the Yunnan Zhuang people calling themselves “Nong” (phu Nong or phu Tei), there is considerable variation of pronunciation, in some cases more than just phonetic differences but actual differences in phonological systems. Therefore, we did not take it for granted that all “Nong Zhuang” would necessarily be able to understand each other. However, our results show that though the Nong cannot understand Dai Zhuang and cannot understand the Yang Zhuang of Jingxi County, Guangxi (at least without extended contact), there is a basic level of comprehension shared by all the Yunnan Nong Zhuang people, in spite of the phonological and lexical differences among the dialects of Nong.

2.4.4.1 Wenshan Milewan Nong RTT

Bingle District, in Wenshan County, is over 50% Nong-speaking. Being only about one hour by bus from the Wenshan Prefecture government seat, there are many Bingle Nong in Wenshan city. Though the population of Nong Zhuang in Wenshan County is less than that of Yanshan and Guangnan counties, Bingle’s Nong accent has potential as a reference dialect due to its convenient location. Therefore the first RTT we recorded was from Milewan Village in Bingle District; it is a story told by a young mother about her experience going to work in a factory in the east of China.

The Milewan recording was tested on individuals or groups in the following locations: Naba Village in Guangnan County’s Zhetu District, Kuaxi Village in Yanshan’s Zhela District, Geji Village in Xichou County’s Xinjie Township, Dongjiang Village in Malipo County’s Babu District, Xiangguangnan Village in Guangnan County’s Liancheng Township and in Xiamugui in Fung County’s Muyang Township. All Nong listeners without exception understood the Milewan story quite well (no score lower than 85% and many perfect scores) in spite of some unfortunate background noise on the recording. It was not clear to speakers where the recording was from; a few listeners correctly guessed Wenshan County (i.e. listeners from Malipo), but others guessed that it was from various locations in Guangnan, Yanshan, Xichou, Maguan or Malipo County. Most of the speakers felt they understood the recording completely or almost perfectly, though one speaker from Naba in Guangnan County (who answered all fourteen questions

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49 However, the Gazetteer also lists Langheng District (now Langheng is part of Tianbeng township) as one of the Bu Xiong locations. Langheng Zhuang officials made no mention of any Zhuang group there named “Xiong,” instead saying that there were three main Zhuang groups in Langheng: Min, Ye (or Tu), and Ngau. In addition to “Bu Xiong,” the Gazetteer also lists two other Zhuang groups in Langheng: Bu Yue (which we assume to be Bu Ye), Bu Ao (which we assume to be Ngau). Therefore it would seem that the “Bu Xiong” listed in the Gazetteer would correspond to the Min Zhuang group, though, if so, we do not know why the characters 布雄 where chose to represent this group, and as the wordlist analysis shows, the Min Zhuang speech variety is not especially close to that of Jingxi. (Unfortunately we have no data from Napo county—though the Min themselves reported that their speech is quite different from that of the Napo Zhuang who border their area.)
perfectly) said that there were a few parts that she did not understand, and a listener from Xiaoguangnan, also in Guangnan County, said that though she understood it perfectly, it was not always easy to understand and it took her a minute to understand some things. Given the significant phonological and lexical differences between the Guangnan County Nong dialects and that of Milewan, it is not surprising that some speakers would feel this way. (It is more surprising, actually, that they understood the recording so well.) As far as whether the accent on the recording was the same or different from listeners’ own, there was no consensus among listeners. Some from Guangnan felt the accent was “exactly the same” as their own speech, whereas a friend from Wenshan County’s Laohuilong (not far from Binglie) felt that the accent was not the same as hers. Though most speakers who acknowledged differences considered the differences to be minor.

2.4.4.2 Guangnan Shangfazao RTT

Zhetu District in Guangnan County is the most heavily Nong Zhuang district of all, with a total Zhuang population of over 91%, of which most are Nong Zhuang (seven of the eight village committees are composed of Nong, the remaining village committee is Yei Zhuang). Zhetu is perceived as being a very conservative area, in terms of both Nong customs and language. On the northern edge of the Nong language area though, it is seemingly less influenced by Chinese and therefore has potential as a good reference dialect, if well understood by Nong in other areas. However, from the wordlist analysis and the researchers’ study of the Zhetu Nong dialect (Susanne Johnson has had three Nong language tutors from Zhetu), we were aware that Zhetu had some phonological features (such as palatalized consonants and slightly different tone values) than Nong outside of Guangnan County. The Zhetu RTT was recorded by a young man from Shangfazao, toward the south of the district who was basically monolingual in Nong until around the age of 10.

The Zhetu RTT was tested among Nong speakers in Kuaxi Village in Yanshan County’s Zhela District, Geji Village in Xichou’s Xinjie District, Dongjiang Village in Malipo’s Babu District, Baituzhai Village in Wenshan’s Binglie District, A’e Xinzhai Village of Maguan County’s Renhe District, Xiamugui of Funing’s Muyang Village, Xiaoguangnan Village in Guangnan County’s Liancheng Township and Naba Village in Guangnan’s Zhetu District. As with the Milewan RTT, all Nong listeners demonstrated adequate comprehension of the Zhetu recording, with many speakers answering all 13 content questions perfectly, though one of the ten listeners in Kuaxi and two of the nine listeners in Geji missed two of the 13 questions (these speakers answered 85% of the questions correctly).

Some of the listeners in Yanshan, which borders Guangnan County, guessed that the story was from Guangnan. Other listeners thought perhaps the story was from Malipo, Yanshan, Wenshan, Maguan or Qiubei. Though a few listeners reported some difficulty understanding some words (notably the word for ‘maize, corn’ used in the story is different in Zhetu dialect than in most other areas), most listeners felt that they understood all or almost all. Though most listeners felt that the Shangfazao accent was different from their own, most felt that those differences were small. (Interestingly, the listeners in Naba Village, in the northern part of the same district, Zhetu, where the story was recorded felt that their speech was slightly different from that of the recording, and indeed, a Nong official in the Zhetu district government told us that “every village in Zhetu speaks a little differently.”)

2.4.4.3 Yanshan Kuaxi RTT

As Yanshan County is home to the second largest population of Nong speakers, we chose one of the most heavily Nong districts in Yanshan, Zhela, to record an RTT. We specifically chose the village of Kuaxi, as this was the village visited by linguists in the 1950s, and the data upon which the “Yan-Guang vernacular” division of Southern Zhuang was based was from Kuaxi, Yanshan, as well as Xiaoguangnan
in Guangnan County. As Kuaxi is fairly central geographically within the Nong speaking area, we were curious as to whether this accent would be perceived as standard and the best understood in all areas.

The Kuaxi RTT was tested in Naba Village in Guangnan County’s Zhetu District, Geji Village in Xichou County’s Xinjie Township and Dongjiang Village in Malipo County’s Babu District. In addition we also tested several individuals from Baituzhai in Wenshan County’s Binglie District, Xiaolao long in Wenshan County’s Binglie District, Tuanpo Village in Wenshan County’s Laohuilong District, A’e Xinzhai Village in Maguan County’s Renhe Township, Xiangguangnan Village in Guangnan County’s Liancheng Township and Xiamugui in Funing County’s Muyang Township. Again the results showed an adequate understanding on the part of all listeners, with no Nong listeners missing more than one content question and many answering all ten questions perfectly. Some listeners guessed that the recording was from Yanshan County, but others guessed Wenshan, Maguan, Malipo or Jiumo District in Guangnan County. (This may be a result of many listeners’ limited exposure to Zhuang outside their areas; after all, we had screened for listeners who had not lived in other Zhuang areas.) Most speakers felt that they understood the story completely and easily, though many acknowledged that the accent was not the same as theirs. However, most speakers again did not see the differences as large. Several young listeners from Wenshan County commented on the fact that the Kuaxi story teller, who was a middle-aged woman, used some more traditional, formal phrasing that young Nong people (at least in Wenshan County) do not use, though they can understand. So possibly there is a generational speech difference conflicting with our evaluation of the geographical dialect difference.

In general there was no significant difference in understanding of the three RTTs. Many listeners seemed to completely understand all three recordings; other speakers missed one question but understood everything else. 50 No RTT stood out as significantly easier to understand, either in terms of scores on the content questions or in terms of the listeners’ reactions. The Nong intelligibility testing indicates that there is a basic level of understanding among Nong of all the major areas, in spite of phonological and lexical differences in different areas. Granted, the RTT texts are short and relatively simple in terms of content and discourse style, and in more complicated topics and discourse styles the geographical dialect differences among the Nong may cause more of a challenge to intelligibility. Nonetheless, these results indicate that the differences among the Nong dialects can be overcome with greater exposure to the dialects of other areas. Listeners recognize the Nong of other areas as “their language” and can understand enough to follow the main plot or idea, and can follow the grammar well enough to identify specific words that they are not familiar with (e.g. “he went to steal kaeu bau,’ I’m not sure what kaeu bau is.”51)

As for choosing a reference dialect for the Nong, the results indicate that either of these three locations would serve as an adequate reference variety. So assuming that it is necessary to choose one of the three, one must look to factors other than intelligibility to make that decision.52

50 Sometimes this was due to a single word not used in their area, such as the word “kaeu bau” for “maize, corn” used in the Zhetu RTT, or the word “ma byau” for “wild dog” used in the Kuaxi RTT. Other times listeners may have missed a question due to other conflicting variables, such as distractions, or inadequate understanding of the researcher’s question or the researcher not understanding perfectly their response.

51 This is similar to American English speakers listening to British slang, and being able to identify specific words with which they are unfamiliar, e.g. “he said he was going to eat bangers, I don’t know what bangers are.”

52 Of course, for many purposes, it is not necessary to identify only one reference dialect. Ideally spelling conventions can be established such that multiple dialects can be spelled in a systematic, uniform way but pronounced according to local accents, and vocabulary choices can be made so that all users have their lexicon enriched by learning new words from related dialects. But audio recordings or broadcasts, of course, cannot be “accent neutral,” and there is a point at which too much merging of dialects for spelling or word choice results in products that are not easily usable by anyone, nor are felt to represent any area’s language and culture.
2.4.5 Min Zhuang comprehension of Nong Zhuang

As just mentioned, the field research included Balong Village in Funing County which we originally believed would be a Nong Zhuang village. Upon arrival, we discovered that the speakers themselves were not familiar with the term “Nong,” rather calling themselves “kwn Min [kan³³min²¹]” or “bu Min [pu²²min²⁴],” (both kwn and bu mean “people” or “ethnic group”). Wordlist analysis shows their speech to be significantly different from the Nong Zhuang areas. We tested several people in Balong, some teachers, some of their 4th grade students, and some older women. Most of the listeners could understand nothing of the Nong Zhuang texts, though the teachers were able to correctly answer 70% of the content questions on the Kuaxi RTT (the other listeners could not understand more than a few words of the Kuaxi RTT). Though the Min Zhuang speakers might be able to learn to understand Nong Zhuang with greater exposure, it looks unlikely that they will have that exposure as there are only a few Nong villages in southern Funing County, and the most widely used Zhuang language in Funing is Ye Zhuang, not Nong Zhuang (the Funing County television station even has Ye Zhuang news broadcasts each night).

2.4.6 Intelligibility with Central Tai languages of Vietnam

Regrettably we were not able to systematically test the intelligibility between the central Taic varieties of Yunnan and those across the border in Northern Vietnam. However, various Wenshan Nong and Dai Zhuang speakers reported having contacts with Vietnamese speakers of their languages. Edmondson, Gregerson and Nguyen (2000) confirm the presence of at least 200 speakers of “Thu Lao” in Muong Khuong District of Lao Cai Province (near the Chinese border by Maguan County), whose language appears to be the same as L-Thongkum 1997's “Dai Tho,” that is, Dai Zhuang.

The author himself on a brief weekend getaway to Bac Ha township in Lao Cai province, northern Vietnam (near the border with Maguan County, Yunnan, China) saw a village name that appeared Taic (“Na Khèo” = “white field”?) and was able to communicate in Nong Zhuang with the villagers. Though not surprisingly, certain loanwords ("bowl," "grade in school") were different, theirs apparently from Vietnamese rather than Chinese, the pronunciation seemed quite similar to that of the southern Nong Zhuang area.

Speakers of Nong Zhuang and Dai Zhuang in Vietnam are classified within the Tày nationality. Probably most speakers reside in the Lao Cai and Ha Giang Provinces of Vietnam which border Yunnan's Wenshan Prefecture, though their may be speakers farther from the border as well.

3 Language Use and Language Vitality

Here we discuss how the rural Nong Zhuang, Dai Zhuang and Min Zhuang peoples of Wenshan use their languages in their daily lives. We focus on patterns of multilingualism as well as language attitudes, to understand the future of these languages in their rapidly changing environments. We begin by describing the linguistic milieu of these languages, and then move on to a brief overview of previous research on language use. Following an explanation of our own language use research methodology, we will present the research findings, and finally summarize the over all Yunnan Southern Zhuang language use patterns and draw conclusions about the future of these languages.

3.1 The Linguistic Milieu

Zhuang languages, like all minority languages in China today, are affected heavily by Chinese. Han Chinese people make up more than 91% of the population of China, and there are many urban and some rural ethnic minorities who also speak some dialect of Chinese as their first language. Even in a minority autonomous area, such as Wenshan prefecture, where Han are a numerical minority, Chinese is still the
most common language used these days, as the two-thirds of the population which are minorities are
divided among dozens of mutually unintelligible languages from four different language families.53
Chinese is the only language used in most formal domains: government, formal medicine, education, etc.
Chinese is also the most common trade language used among different ethnic groups who do not share a
common mutually intelligible language. Usually Zhuang and Han or Miao and Yi use the local dialect of
Chinese to communicate and in town markets in most areas of Wenshan, local dialect Chinese is the most
common language heard. There are exceptions; for example, in the heavily Zhuang areas of northern
Guangnan and Funing it’s not unusual to meet Yi, Miao, Yao or even Han who can understand and
sometimes even speak the local Zhuang dialect, although this is probably less often the case now than it
was a century ago. As Giersch (2006:222) writes:

In Qing times [1644–1911], indigenous languages were important to learn, and Chinese
settlers picked up [the local indigenous languages] in order to participate in marketing
and local affairs, even as indigenes also learned Yunnanese for the same purposes.
Today, in remote areas where ethnic Chinese are a minority, there is a clear linguistic
heirarchy, reinforced by the national educational system and local government
institutions; it places Mandarin Chinese above all other languages, and it has become
much more common for indigenes to find [the] Chinese language useful than for [Han]
Chinese to find indigenous languages useful.

Though the Putonghua dialect of Chinese (also known as Mandarin, or Guanhua, or Guoyu) is the official
language of China54 and is almost exclusively used in national and provincial level broadcast media, local
dialects of Chinese are much more common than standard Putonghua in daily life in Wenshan for both
Han and ethnic minority people. Though there are variations in the phonology and lexicon of local
Chinese throughout Wenshan prefecture, from county to county and even within counties, to our
knowledge, in all Wenshan prefecture locations except for Bo’ai township of Funing County the local
Chinese dialects are varieties of Southwestern Mandarin (Xinan Guanhua). With the exception of Bo’ai,
the local Chinese dialects spoken within the prefecture do not differ from each other to the degree so as to
cause communication difficulties, assuming the speakers adequately command Wenshan Chinese. The
Wenshan Chinese dialects are significantly different, however, from other Southwest Mandarin dialects,
such as Kunminghua, Sichuan dialects, and Guilihua (in Guangxi). Throughout this article when the
terms “local Chinese dialect” or “Wenshan Chinese” are employed, we are referring to the variety of
Southwestern Mandarin Chinese as spoken in that county. When the terms “Putonghua” or “Standard
Chinese” are used, we are referring to the official standard dialect of Chinese as used in national
broadcast media and taught in elementary textbooks through the Pinyin Romanization.

There is some limited broadcasting in minority languages (the prefecture radio station broadcasts several
times daily in Nong Zhuang, as well reportedly in Miao, Yi and Yao languages, and Funing County
television broadcasts daily in Guibian (Yei) Northern Zhuang). Use of minority languages in formal
domains has been hampered by the lack of a single language understood by the majority of the population
in any of Wenshan’s eight counties, with the exception of Funing (where probably at least half of the
population can understand Guibian Yei Zhuang)—also the fact that all of Wenshan’s minority languages
lack widely used writing systems. In fact, national and provincial government language commissions

53 The four families are: Tibeto-Burman, Tai-Kadai, Hmong-Mien and Mon-Khmer. The first three are grouped by many Chinese
linguists into a larger “Sino-Tibetan” grouping. There is only one known Mon-Khmer language in Wenshan prefecture, the
Bugan language, spoken by a few hundred people in southern Guangnan county and northern Xichou counties (Li 1996c, Wu
2004).
54 The word Putonghua (普通话) literally means “common speech”. Chinese living outside mainland China often prefer the
term Guoyu (国语), meaning “national language”.

have developed Romanized orthographies for Zhuang, Yao and Miao, and there is an official ideographic script intended for use by Yunnan’s many different Yi nationality language groups. None of these ethnic groups however have there been widespread, successful literacy campaigns in the minority scripts within Wenshan prefecture, and most minority language speakers in Wenshan are not aware of the existence of these scripts.

3.2 Previous Language Use Research

Although there has been extensive research on the Tai languages as a group and on certain of the Taic languages in particular, such as Thai and Wuming Northern Zhuang, there has been very little language use research on the Taic languages of China. To our knowledge, the only published research on Zhuang language use within Wenshan Prefecture is the article on Wenshan Prefecture in the volume on minority language use published by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS 1994:573–576). According to this article,

The vast majority of Zhuang people use their Zhuang language(s) as their primary means of communication, only in the vicinity of the county seat(s) have the young people lost the ability to speak Zhuang, though they can still understand. Zhuang cadres in government offices typically use both Zhuang and Chinese amongst themselves, Zhuang is the primary language for daily topics, whereas Chinese is used more for work topics. Chinese is the primary language used in the lower grades of elementary school, though Zhuang is used to supplement the Chinese. In 1980, the prefecture people’s broadcasting station began using the Zhuang language in three half hour radio broadcasts per day, the content is news and the dissemination of popular science information. The prefecture film company has dubbed 39 dramatic films into the Zhuang language. (CASS 1994:574)

In addition, this article goes on to present the results of a short non-random sample survey of two Zhuang villages: Aji village (阿基村) in Maguan County’s Xiao Malipo district, and Shuichezhai (水车寨), just outside the prefecture government seat city of Kaihua. The article does not state the Zhuang subgroup/language spoken in these villages, but from data gathered in Maguan and Wenshan counties during the course of our own research, we know that Shuichezhai has historically been entirely Dai Zhuang, whereas Aji village has both Nong and Dai Zhuang residents. In Aji, out of 54 people sampled no one had any trouble whatsoever understanding Zhuang, though eight had only limited comprehension of Chinese and four understood no Chinese. In contrast, in Shuichezhai, on the edge of the largest city in the area, of the 22 people sampled, only five understood Zhuang well, ten understood no Zhuang and seven reported partial comprehension, but all 22 understood Chinese. Literacy data is also presented for Aji village—no one sampled there was literate in Zhuang and only eight were evaluated as literate in Chinese. (Of the remainder, 17 were considered “partially illiterate 半文盲” and 29 were illiterate in Chinese.) The article reports that in some mountainous locations in Maguan County, only 40% of minority children attended school at that time, due to remote locations and inability to pay school fees.

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55 This Yi ideographic script is not a traditional script itself, but a combination of characters from several independent traditional orthographies.
56 Numerous times Zhuang speakers told the researchers, “our language has no writing system,” and were surprised to be shown the Zhuang Roman script on the Chinese currency they handle every day! The Zhuang spelling on every unit of the Chinese currency is based on Yongbei Northern Zhuang pronunciation, not their Southern Zhuang, and on the one, two or five jiao bills (1/10, 2/10 or 5/10 of a yuan), the orthography appears to be the older, 1950s version of the national Zhuang orthography. But nonetheless, it is a writing system that can basically be used to write these languages as well, with a few spelling adaptations.
57 Actually, now Shuichezhai has been annexed into the city of Kaihua, though such was not the case when these data were collected in the 1980s.
In this same volume (CASS 1994) there is another article about the language use of the Zhuang nationality as a whole (pp 838–842). According to this article, 97% of Zhuang nationality people can understand some Zhuang language. Of those who understand a Zhuang language, 57% are bilingual\(^\text{58}\) in Chinese and Zhuang (55% of all Zhuang nationality people). According to their sample, the bilingualism rate among Yunnan’s Zhuang is higher than that of Guangxi’s Zhuang, but lower than that of Guangdong’s Zhuang: 73% of Yunnan’s Zhuang are reported to be bilingual, whereas only 54% of Guangxi’s Zhuang are so, but 90% of Guangdong’s Zhuang people are bilingual. Wenshan prefecture’s Zhuang “mostly can all speak the local Chinese dialect” and young people living in county seat towns or in the immediate vicinity often use Chinese as their primary language. The Zhuang living in the Honghe Hani and Yi Autonomous prefecture speak Dai Zhuang (Wen-Ma Southern Zhuang). The Zhuang of Yunnan generally use Zhuang languages with the members of their own language groups, but local Chinese with members of other ethnic groups.

The Yunnan Province Gazetteer (Yunnan Sheng Zhi 1998) only contains two sentences in its section on the Yunnan Zhuang languages: “Zhuang is the primary means of communication of the Zhuang ethnicity. A portion of Zhuang people also use Chinese” (p. 168).

3.3 Language Use Research Methodology

Language use and bilingualism are characteristics of the population of speakers rather than of the language itself, and therefore without careful sampling it is not possible to statistically generalize the results. The ideal sampling situation for assessing features of the population of speakers is pure random sampling which requires an exhaustive sampling frame—that is, a complete list of the names (and locations) of every member of the population in question, which in our case would be every speaker of Yunnan Southern Zhuang languages: a population of more than half a million people. Due to this large population and the fact that Chinese census records classify speakers of various Zhuang languages and also those people who have at least one Zhuang parent in the same general category of belonging to the Zhuang nationality, we deemed it not viable to construct such a sampling frame. At the beginning of our survey, we did not even have a complete list of southern Zhuang villages, though during the course of the survey we were able to construct such a list, thanks in large part to the detailed records published in the Chinese Place Name Gazetteer series (中国地名志), published county by county in the 1980s.

Instead of pure random sampling of speakers or villages, we decided to focus our research on geographical dialect differences and intelligibility, and along the way try to observe the extremes of the Yunnan Southern Zhuang speakers’ language use continuum in a variety of villages. We were curious to try to answer the following types of questions: Are there any Yunnan Southern Zhuang villages that have completely switched to Chinese and lost the ability to speak Southern Zhuang? Are there any villages left where a significant percentage of the population speaks no Chinese, but is basically monolingual in Southern Zhuang? We decided to spend the limited time we had in each village observing and dialoguing with village residents about their language use situation, and trying to understand more of the complete sociolinguistic setting, rather than just isolated responses to binary questions.

Therefore in the course of the Yunnan Southern Zhuang fieldwork, we interviewed local Zhuang leaders and residents in a number of villages about the language use situation in their villages, and we also made note of the languages we heard used around us\(^\text{59}\). We created and made use of two tools for this: the "Zhuang Local Leader Language Use Questionnaire" and a "Language Use Observation Record." The

\(^{58}\) It is not clear how bilingualism was evaluated; though 97% are said to “understand Zhuang” (dong, 懂), with regards to the bilingual Zhuang, the words “speak both Zhuang and Chinese” (cao Zhuang Han shuang yu, 操壮汉双语) were used.

\(^{59}\) We recognize, of course, our very limited exposure and also the observer’s paradox, here manifesting itself in the courteous habit of often switching to Chinese when an outsider is present.
Local Leader Questionnaire involves the use of detailed maps of the area surrounding the villages, the goal being to understand the surrounding multilingual environment (or monolingual in some areas) in which the local residents do marketing, schooling, government activities, etc. We found local Zhuang leaders both very knowledgeable about the villages and languages used in their areas and also very friendly and helpful.

In total we interviewed leaders in thirteen Southern Zhuang-speaking villages, of which four are Dai Zhuang, eight are Nong Zhuang and one is Min Zhuang:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language group</th>
<th>Village name</th>
<th>Community</th>
<th>District or Township</th>
<th>County</th>
<th>Date visited</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nong Zhuang</td>
<td>Xiaoguangnan (小广南村)</td>
<td>Xiaoguangnan (小广南村委会)</td>
<td>Liancheng Township (莲城镇)</td>
<td>Guangnan (广南县)</td>
<td>July 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nong Zhuang</td>
<td>Jiangdong (江东)</td>
<td>Jiangdong (江东村委会)</td>
<td>Babu District (八布乡)</td>
<td>Malipo (麻栗坡县)</td>
<td>March 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nong Zhuang</td>
<td>Geji (革机村)</td>
<td>Longping (龙坪村委会)</td>
<td>Xingjie Township (兴街镇)</td>
<td>Xichou (西畴县)</td>
<td>Oct. 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nong Zhuang</td>
<td>Kuaxi (垮溪村)</td>
<td>Kuaxi (垮溪村委会)</td>
<td>Zhela District (者腊乡)</td>
<td>Yanshan (砚山县)</td>
<td>Oct. 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dai Zhuang</td>
<td>Xiao Minghu (小明湖村)</td>
<td>Minghu (明湖村委会)</td>
<td>Dehou Township (德后镇)</td>
<td>Wenshan (文山县)</td>
<td>Nov. 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dai Zhuang</td>
<td>Laochangpo (老厂坡村)</td>
<td>Tangfang (塘房村委会)</td>
<td>Nanlao Township (南捞镇)</td>
<td>Maguan (马关县)</td>
<td>Jan. 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dai Zhuang</td>
<td>Shuichezhai (水车寨) and Niutouzhai (牛头寨)</td>
<td>Hongqi (红旗村委会) and Libujia(里布戛村委会)</td>
<td>Kaihua Township (开化镇)</td>
<td>Wenshan (文山县)</td>
<td>Nov. 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dai Zhuang</td>
<td>Songshupo (松树坡村)</td>
<td>Bainitang (白泥塘委员会)</td>
<td>Zhulin Township (珠琳镇)</td>
<td>Guangnan (广南县)</td>
<td>Sept. 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Min Zhuang</td>
<td>Guixun-Anhe (贵训小组-安哈村)</td>
<td>Balong (Langheng Production committee) (朗恒办公所，叭咙村委会)</td>
<td>Tianpeng Township (田蓬镇)</td>
<td>Funing (富宁县)</td>
<td>March 2007</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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60 For this we photocopied detailed sections of the Wenshan Prefecture map produced by the Yunnan Provincial Bureau of Cartography (Yunnan Province 1986), and then were able to circle and label specific villages to indicate various nationalities and ethnic groupings.

61 For this researcher (ECJ) these interviews were the most enjoyable part of the research!
Our method of selecting villages was first based on known concentrations of Southern Zhuang speakers. For the Dai Zhuang, for instance, we knew there were many Dai Zhuang villages (so-called “Pointed Headdress Tu”) in eastern Maguan and western Malipo County, where Laochang village is located, also around Wenshan city (“Flat Headdress Tu”) where Niuoutzhai is located, in northern Wenshan and western Yanshan (“Piled-up Headdress Tu”), where Xiao Minghu is located, and also some scattered villages in southwest Guangnan County (“Slanted Headdress Tu”), where Songshupo is located. For the Nong, who have a far greater number of villages, selecting a limited number of datapoints was more difficult, so we settled on only choosing datapoints in districts or townships in which Southern Zhuang speakers are a numerical majority of the total population (i.e. more than 50%). However, as there is no single district of Xichou County in which Zhuang form a numerical majority, we added a data point down in the river valley in the heart of Xichou County where most of that county’s Zhuang villages are located. Also, though Nanlao township in eastern Maguan County is 54% Zhuang (in the 1990 census), this figure combines both the Dai and Nong Zhuang speakers. There are quite a few Nong villages also in the west of Maguan County, so while our Maguan Dai Zhuang datapoint is in Nanlao Township, we chose a Nong Zhuang village in Renhe Township for the Nong Zhuang datapoint. In the very heavily Nong district of Zhetu in Guangnan County (93% Zhuang), we chose the village of Xia Douyue on the northern edge of the district because we were curious about the exact location of the boundary between the Nong Zhuang and Guibian (Yei) Northern Zhuang speaking areas, and about whether there was a clearly defined distinction at the northern edge of the Yunnan Southern Zhuang speaking area between Southern and Northern Zhuang dialects, or if in the speakers’ impression, the two languages just blended together in a dialect continuum.62 The Funing County datapoint of Balong was originally expected to be another Nong Zhuang location, and it was only upon arrival that we learned that this area speaks another Southern Zhuang variety called “Min” ([kəŋ²²min²⁴]; kəŋ²² means ‘language’).63

After choosing a district or township location, we would typically visit the local government before deciding on a specific visit. We would ask local leaders to help us select a village whose population was close to 100% Zhuang and a bit removed from the main road (almost all of our datapoints were away from paved intra-county level roads).65 Our methods of accessing these villages varied with every data point, from government vehicles, to a rental van, to horse carts, to motorcycles, to hiking. Usually we stayed in the villages several nights, lodged with local families (the Zhuang pride themselves on their hospitality), though if there was a government office nearby with beds, sometimes we stayed there instead. Most village leaders are farmers as well as fulfilling their governmental and party responsibilities, so we worked around their schedule, often interviewing them in the evening after the sun had set—so we

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62 As it turns out, Nong Zhuang speakers in Douyue were clearly aware of the contrast between their own speech and that of “Sha” people (who call themselves Yei, but are known in Chinese as Sha people: 沙人 or 沙族), though many are partially bidialectal. Speakers of Yeizhuang in Ake district (now being renamed Bamei Township), just north of the Nong Zhuang area in Guangnan county were also clearly aware of the contrast between their own speech and that of the “Nong” people, though again, many of the Ake Yei were able to understand Nong.

63 We did manage to collect a very short wordlist from some Funing Nong Zhuang speakers from Xiamugui in Muyang district and do enough intelligibility testing to confirm that they understood Nong from other areas, but we did not have enough time to do a full interview in Xiamugui.

64 Depending on the situation and Wang Mingfu’s previous contacts in the area, “visiting the local government” could involve any combination of the various levels of rural government: county, township, district, production committee, community or village.

65 It was both necessary to have local leaders’ approval of our choice of village and support to do the research, and also practical as, with hundreds of Zhuang villages to choose from, we wouldn’t have known where to start! However, we did not usually get the impression that local leaders had any agenda in guiding us to (or away from) any particular village. Within a given area, the villages seem to be approximately equal in development, similar in attitudes, etc., so there wasn’t any particular motivation for them to want us to go to one village over another, except to try to make sure that we stayed safe and didn’t get trapped somewhere during the rainy months.
found lodging in the villages to be the most useful way to get the research done, and we feel that we came to understand the situation a bit better, in spite of our limited time, having been in the villages at each moment of the day rather than just during the daytime hours.66

In the following sections we will present a profile of each village visited, based on the interviews and observations in that village. While we cannot claim that these thirteen profiles are completely representative of the Yunnan Southern Zhuang language use and attitudes, we do feel that each village’s situation does provide another facet of the rich and complicated sociolinguistic milieu in which Yunnan’s Southern Zhuang speakers live. We hope that these profiles will help the reader see the human side of these beautiful and fascinating languages.

3.4 Nong Zhuang Language Use Datapoints

3.4.1 Kuaxi Village in Yanshan County

In Yanshan County we visited the Nong Zhuang village of Kuaxi in Zhela district.67 Almost three quarters of the population of Zhela district is Zhuang, which is a higher Zhuang percentage than any other district or township in Yanshan County, and Zhela is one of only two districts in that county whose Zhuang form a majority of the district population.68 The vast majority of Zhuang people in eastern Yanshan County are of the Nong Zhuang group.

Zhang 2000 records that in 1990 Zhuang people formed 71.8% of the population of Zhela township, and the Zhela district government figure provided the following ethnic breakdown for district in 2005: 72% are Zhuang, 14% are Han, 13% Miao and 1% Yi, with a few Dai families. The entire district had a population of 29375 people, living in 6256 households.

We chose the village of Kuaxi for our datapoint. We selected this location because this was the location visited by a team of linguists from the Minority Language Research Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in the late 1950s.69 We thought it would be interesting to visit the same location a half century later and elicit some of the same words to compare how much or little the pronunciation and lexicon may have changed during that period.

Kuaxi village itself is 27 km from the Yanshan county seat of Jiangna town, on a cobblestone road, but only 3 km from the government seat of Zhela district. The administrative community (cunweihui, 村委会) to which Kuaxi belongs consists of nine villages (total population: 4057), of which eight are Nong Zhuang (about 730 households) and one is Phula Yi (about 180 households). Kuaxi village proper is the government seat for the community and has a population of 1100 in 237 households, all of which are Zhuang, except for a few non-Zhuang spouses.

66 Of course, Wang Mingfu himself, being Zhuang and having spent his life both living in this area and researching the minority cultures of Wenshan, saw things not as an outsider but as an insider. The Johnsons are of course outsiders, but have lived in Zhuang areas of Wenshan for over two years.
67 We also elicited an additional Yanshan county wordlist from a Nong speaker from Panlong district a bit south of the county seat, near the new prefecture airport.
68 The other is neighboring Bang’e district, 蚌峨乡. Though Zhuang are not a numerical majority in Yanshan’s other districts and townships, Zhuang are found throughout this county, making up almost 1/3 of the county’s population (137,000 people in 2003, according to Yunnan Province 2004). According to Yanshan Xian Dinning Zhi (1990), in the 1980s, over 360 Yanshan villages had Zhuang residents, of which over 200 were entirely composed of Zhuang people.
69 Two small groups of linguists surveyed Zhuang dialects of Yunnan in the late fifties. Chinese linguists Zhang Junru (张均如), Liang Min (梁敏), Liang Erchang (梁尔昌), Lu Hongmei (陆红妹), Li Yanshuang (李燕霜), and others participated in the Yunnan survey. Their wordlist data from five Yunnan datapoints is provided in Zhang et al. 1999.
Within Kuaxi village, we were told that everyone can speak Nong, and most people speak Wenshan Chinese well also, except for some older people and the younger pre-school children who only speak Nong. Children generally learn to speak Nong before Chinese, and though many children know some Chinese before starting elementary school, the several ethnically Han teachers at the Kuaxi elementary school who cannot speak Nong report being unable to communicate well with the first grade students. Though Nong is the primary home language in the majority of Kuaxi homes, there are a few homes where parents speak to the children in Chinese at home because they want to raise “cultured” (i.e. educated) children. A few men have married Han wives, but these wives have learned Nong, and the children of these marriages speak Nong.

The older people feel the younger people speak Nong exactly as they do and cannot imagine a day when their great-grandchildren could not speak Nong. For story-telling, joking or scolding, they would always be inclined to use Nong rather than Chinese. Some young people, as well as the old people, know how to recount traditional stories and fables. Village announcements are broadcast in Nong and village meetings take place in a mixture of Nong and Chinese (depending on who is present and the topic).

Though every family has a television and most villagers watch television frequently (in Chinese), reading is less common, with some of the older people reading newspapers and magazines (in Chinese), we were told. The younger people say they are too busy to read. The only written materials we observed in the village were Chinese geomancy calendars, Communist party handbooks, and elementary school textbooks. The people we talked to were not aware that there is an orthography for the Zhuang language and felt that it would be impossible to write down Nong stories or songs, although the two mugong (traditional religious leaders) did tell us that they had two books of Nong fortune-telling writings, written in Fangkuaizi (modified Chinese characters, see the following section of Zhuang Orthographies), which they said they could read.70

The Kuaxi community has three first through sixth grade elementary schools, including one in Kuaxi village itself. In nearby Zhela there is a middle school, and the nearest high school is in Jiangna, the Yanshan county seat. Though Kuaxi elementary students mostly just have other Nong for classmates, middle school and high school students study with Han, Yi and Miao students. Kuaxi students do not need to live in a dormitory until high school due to the proximity of the schools, so a fairly large number of students attend some middle school (over Kuaxi community 200 students were in middle school at the time of our visit out of a total population of 4000 people). Very few students however continue on to high school or beyond, largely due to the problem of expensive school fees.

For marketing the Kuaxi residents participate in the Zhela market days, which is also attended by many Nong Zhuang from neighboring Bang’e district. They speak Nong with other Nong, and even with some of the Han, Miao and Yi in the area who are partially fluent in Nong. With those who cannot understand Nong, they speak Wenshan Chinese. They can identify who is Nong because they wear more colorful clothes than the Han, and the Miao and Yi wear their own distinctive costumes (usually just the women).

Some in the village go to Shanghai, Zhejiang or Guangdong provinces to work and earn money. Most return within a year, though there are some who stay longer, but all can still speak Nong fluently upon their return. Economically, though the village is predominantly engaged in subsistence agriculture, they are less isolated than many Zhuang villages, with 24-hour electricity and mobile phone service and scheduled bus service to the county seat. Many of the houses have cement foundations and are built of

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70 Possibly because the only type of literacy they are aware of is in Chinese, which uses a script not directly tied to phonetic pronunciation.
kiln-baked bricks, whereas others are built of the traditional sun-dried mud brick. All are roofed with grey tile, as are most of the village houses in Wenshan prefecture.

### 3.4.2 Xiao Milewan village in Wenshan County

Xiao Milewan village is located in Binglie district in northeastern Wenshan County, which borders Yanshan County. Binglie is the only district in Wenshan County in which Zhuang form a numerical majority, though Matang township, directly west of Binglie (and north of Kaihua city) is right around 50% Zhuang. In 2004, Binglie township had a Zhuang population of about 12,500, almost all of whom were Nong, which composed 56% of the total district population. The next largest ethnic group in the district is Azha Yi, forming over one-third of the district population.71 Small percentages of Han, Miao and Dai also live in the district, and there is one Dai Zhuang village in Binglie district (Shangshuqi, 上树起). The Nong of Binglie call themselves [pʰu²²noŋ⁴⁴] and call the neighboring Dai Zhuang [pʰu²²ʔdai⁴⁴].72 The Nong cannot understand the Dai language, nor the Dai Nong, so these two Zhuang groups use Wenshan Chinese to communicate with each other.

Xiao Milewan is about 50 km from Kaihua city on paved and cobble-stone roads, and there is scheduled bus service daily. The village consists of 128 households, with a population of 576, the vast majority of which are Nong, though there is considerable intermarriage with Azha (Yi) and Han people. Even though they live in a heavily Nong area, the residents of Xiao Milewan have considerable contact with people of other ethnic groups as they live only two km from the Binglie district government seat where they market on Wednesdays, and the same distance from a large Azha village called Xiao Pingba. They also market at Matang township on Saturdays, and many go into Kaihua city frequently or work there, thanks to the convenient and inexpensive (less than $1 US) minibuses that make multiple trips each day.

Although most of the children speak Nong fluently (“90%”), respondents felt that only children whose mothers spoke Nong as their first language could really be expected to be fluent in Nong. The people we spoke with thought it was good for Nong people to speak Nong and it would also be good if they could read and write Nong (the respondents were aware that Zhuang could be written with Chinese characters, but had not heard of a Roman orthography for Zhuang). They didn’t feel that maintaining the Nong language in the future was essential, and they themselves seemed to feel there was a trade-off that might have to be made between the Nong language and full education. They said that “if all kids go to school, then only the old people will speak Zhuang.” When asked to respond to the statement: “if there is no Nong language there won’t be any Nong culture,” the respondents said “not necessarily,” meaning that Nong culture could continue without the Nong language being vital. They all knew Nong who were raising their families in Kaihua city, and felt that most children growing up in the city would not be truly fluent in Nong, but felt that the trade-offs in better education and job opportunities might be worth it.

### 3.4.3 Geji Village in Xichou County

Xichou is the smallest of Wenshan prefecture’s eight counties in land area, population and also in percentage of Zhuang population, at only 10% of the county population (Yunnan Province 2004). The 25,000 Zhuang of Xichou County live in over 200 villages, but only about forty of these are not shared

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71 See Pelkey et al 2005 for more on the relationship of the Azha and Nong languages in Binglie district.
72 The Nong word [pʰu⁵³] (also pronounced without aspiration in some areas: [pu⁵³]) and the Dai word [ʔbu⁵³] corresponds to the Chinese zu (族), meaning ‘people, ethnic group’.
with members of other ethnic groups according to *Xichou Di Ming Zhi* (1987). The Zhuang in Xichou County live in several pockets, one in the far north in Jijie district near Guangnan County, a string of villages at the bottom of a steep river valley that runs from the county seat of Xisa south through Xingjie township and then southwest into Malipo County, and then a half dozen Dai Zhuang villages on the southern border of the county, near Maguan County’s Tangfang area (where the Laochang Dai Zhuang datapoint is located.)

The village we visited, Geji, is in the center of the central river valley string of Nong Zhuang villages. It is at the floor of the valley by the river, below its community government seat of Longping, which is up at the level of the road higher in elevation. Geji is about 30 km from the township seat of Xingjie. It can be accessed by car from Xingjie via a gravel road at the bottom of the valley, or on foot one can reach the road above the village via a 30-minute hike on a steep mountain path, and then flag down one of the many passing minivans to reach Xinjie or Xisa, which is 50 km north. With a population of 238 in 68 households, Geji is one of the larger Zhuang villages in Xichou, though average in size compared to Nong villages elsewhere. Geji is 100% Nong, but in the community of Longping there are 18 Han villages, with only six other smaller Nong villages. Han are the majority of the community’s 7000 people (969 households).

Everyone in Geji can speak Nong, including several Han wives who have married Nong speakers. However, even in the village, Chinese seems to be making inroads on the intimate domains—some parents felt their children spoke Chinese better than Nong; we were told that although all children could understand Nong, some could say only simple things in Nong. We were told that the children usually speak Nong with grandparents and older relatives but local Chinese amongst themselves. We ourselves observed both grandparents and parents speaking Wenshan Chinese to children and children speaking Wenshan Chinese in return. However, some told us that when the children finish as much schooling as they are able to do, then finish their years of working outside the village and settle back into a farming life in the village, that’s when their Nong becomes fluent.

We noticed a significant dearth of younger adults in the village. In several days residence in Geji, we only encountered four people between the ages of 15 and 30. We were told that 70% of the young adults under the age of 35 have left the village to work.

Geji residents do their marketing at four different locations: Longping, their community government seat; Xingjie, their township seat; Banggu, the neighboring district; and Xisa, the Xichou county seat. At all of these markets they speak Nong with other Nong, but the majority of the people they encounter are not Nong and with them they must use Wenshan Chinese. Likewise, although there is an elementary school in Geji village, after sixth grade the students who continue study with classmates do not speak Nong (mostly Han students) at the middle school in Xingjie and then at the high school in Nasa if they go that far. As both Xingjie and Nasa are too far to walk daily, Geji students live in dormitories at these schools, and as the majority of their dorm-mates are not Nong, they use relatively little Nong during their middle and high school years. At the elementary school in Geji, all but one teacher are Han and do not speak Nong.

Of all the Nong villages we visited, the Nong language seemed the most endangered at Geji, with apparently many of the children growing up only partially fluent, although all can still understand and

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73 The *Xichou Di Ming Zhi* lists 18 villages which are 100% Zhuang, but Zhuang survey participants in Geji and in Laochang, Maguan (which is near the border with Xichou county) knew of a number more which were completely or almost completely Zhuang.

74 At the time of our visit, no student from Geji was attending high school. Seventy percent of the Geji children attend elementary school and at least 30 were attending middle school.
speak to some degree. This is likely due both to the small population of Nong Zhuang in Xichou County and to the broad scattering of their villages, thus making it impossible for them to maintain a significant social network via the Nong language. The large percentage of parental-aged adults absent from the village probably also contributes to a breakdown in transmission of Nong to this new generation—the children are largely being raised by grandparents and teachers, the latter of which at the Geji school generally only speak Chinese.

3.4.4 Xinzhai Village in Maguan County

About 15% of Maguan County’s population is Zhuang, or about 55,000 people (Yunnan Province 2004), but this population is divided among several different Zhuang sub-groups, including both Nong and Dai Zhuang. Only in Nanlao district do the Zhuang form a slim majority (54%) and there only because the entire population of that district is so small (fewer than 12,000 in 1990). Although we selected our Dai Zhuang datapoint from within Nanlao district, for our Nong data point we chose a village close to the geographical center of the county’s scattered Nong villages, in Renhe township, about 15 km from the county seat of Mabai.

Xinzhai is one of eight villages in A’e community, which has 2340 people in 542 households. Half the villages are Miao, two are Nong Zhuang and two are Han. Xinzhai itself consists of 480 people in 106 households. Over 400 people in Xinzhai are Nong, but there are also nine households of Gelao, an officially recognized ethnic group in China, whose historic languages are distantly related to Zhuang languages (classified by some in a Ge-Yang branch of the Tai-Kadai/Kam-Tai family). However the Gelao of Xinzhai stopped speaking Gelao generations back and mostly speak Wenshan Chinese, although all understand Nong also and some can speak Nong. The Gelao women now wear the Maguan Nong Zhuang costume.75 There are no Han households, though a few Nong have married Han spouses.

All Nong Zhuang children in the village speak Nong as their first language, though all speak Chinese to some degree as well. One six-year-old did tell us that it was harder to speak in local Chinese than Nong, and an eight-year-old with him was not able to interact in Chinese at all. Some of the older people speak no Chinese, only Nong.

The residents of Xinzhai frequent the market in Renhe on Sundays; it is about an hour walk from Xinzhai. Usually they speak Wenshan Chinese at the market because Miao and Han are more numerous than Nong at the market.

The men of the village of Xinzhai continue a traditional woodblock print art form called *Banhua* (版画) in Chinese, and the village has recently begun to attract the attention of the outside world. While tourists to the village are not frequent, the government is hoping to develop a cultural tourism industry for the village. In the last few years the village has been the beneficiary of poverty alleviation funds from the national, provincial, prefectural and county governments. They have used these to pave the road to the village and the footpaths between the houses and a modern town hall, which can double as an arts and crafts gallery (the women, like Nong women in most villages, make beautiful embroidery, appliqué, and hand woven cloth). Most of the men create *Banhua* prints, but still rely primarily on farming.

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75 The official classification of China’s ethnic groups took place mostly in the 1950s, so presumably at that point these Gelao families had more distinctive Gelao cultural features, so they were classified Gelao rather than Zhuang.
The Nong of Xinzhai have frequent contact with “Nong” people from Vietnam, who pass through their village often en route from the border checkpoint at Hekou to Wenshan for trade, etc. The Xinzhai Nong say that there is no difference between them and the Vietnamese “Nong.”

3.4.5 Jiangdong Village in Malipo County

Malipo County is a narrow, mountainous county along the southern border of Wenshan prefecture. It contains Wenshan prefecture’s main border crossing into Vietnam at Tianbao township, south of the county seat of Mali. In terms of Zhuang population, Malipo has fewer Zhuang people than any other Wenshan County except for Xichou County—32,900 Zhuang in 2003, or 15% of the county population (Yunnan Province 2004)—and there are no districts or townships in Malipo where the Zhuang form a majority. We did manage to visit a majority Nong community within the district of Babu (八布乡), on the Vietnamese border northeast of the county seat.

Jiangdong community consists of 18 villages, of which 13 are Nong Zhuang, three are Miao and two are ethnically Han. The community is 54 km from the county seat and about five km outside the Babu district market town. We visited Jiangdong village, where the community government office and elementary school are located. Jiangdong village has 28 households, of which all but three are Nong Zhuang. Those three are classified as ethnically Han, but also speak Nong Zhuang, and the Han women wear the same Nong costume as the ethnically Nong women. There are a lot of marriages with Han people who are the largest ethnic group in the area (except for in Jiangdong community itself), but if the couple settles in a Nong village, the Han spouse learns to speak Nong.

As Jiangdong is quite far from the county seat and other towns, the only market practical for most residents is the Babu district market which takes place every six days, and is attended by Han, Miao, Yao and “Tai Lao” people of Vietnam. Though it is often necessary to use Wenshan Chinese with people there who do not understand Nong, among the older people who don’t speak Chinese well, Nong is the main language they use at the market.

The community government meetings generally take place in Wenshan Chinese as their community includes five non-Nong villages, but traditionally if it has to do with a village matter then the meeting will be conducted in Nong. Everyone in the village speaks some degree of local Chinese, however, and until recently everyone could speak Nong. However, the people we interviewed in Jiangdong reported a recent shift taking place toward Chinese. According to them, although all the adults still speak both languages, now there are many people who feel that they speak Wenshan Chinese better than Nong. Many of the preschool children seem to be able to speak in Wenshan Chinese only and even have trouble understanding Nong. The cause for this recent shift, in the opinion of the participants, was an intentional focus on increasing the children’s fluency in Chinese so that they would excel in school and have better job prospects. Apparently many parents in the village feel that they should only speak to their children in

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76 The Xinzhai residents call these people “Nong,” like themselves. However, the Taic language groups of Vietnam are classified into several different official ethnic groups. The particular people with whom the Maguan Nong have contact are most likely classified as either Nùng, Tày or San Chay in Vietnam, as these three nationalities consist of Central Tai-speaking language groups, to our knowledge.

77 The elementary school is theoretically first through sixth grade, though first grade is not offered every year, depending on the number of students and teacher and classroom availability.

78 We are not able to identify this people group from Vietnam. Both of the names “Tai/Tay” and “Lau/Lao” are ancient Taic autonyms used in various forms by many language groups. The Dai Zhuang on both sides of the border are commonly referred to as Tu Lao (Tho Lao), so these Vietnamese visiting the Babu market could be a far eastern group of Dai Zhuang, though Edmondson et al 2000 encountered the Vietnamese Dai/Tho Lao farther west at Muong Khuong in Lao Cai province (opposite Wenshan’s Maguan county), whereas the area directly across the border from Babu is east of Thanh Thuy in Ha Giang province.
Chinese, as speaking to them in Nong could cause them to be behind their Chinese-speaking classmates in elementary school. As access to higher education beyond primary school can be quite competitive in rural China, they then might not have good enough test scores to continue.

### 3.4.6 Xiao Guangnan Village in Guangnan County

The village of Xiao Guangnan, about six km out of the Guangnan county seat of Liancheng, is quite possibly the largest Zhuang village in Yunnan with nearly 2500 people. Xiang Guangnan and near-by Liancheng are rich in history, originally the capital (?) of an ancient Zhuang kingdom called Gouding (勾丁, Ceng 2006), then near the site where the Zhuang rebel Nong Zhigao (农知高) was defeated (bringing an end to the short lived Kingdom of Southern Peace, Nan Tian Guo 南天国 (1023–1051, Huang et al 2003), and finally during the Qing dynasty being the Zhuang sister-city to the Han town of Liancheng, the government headquarters for Guangnan 府, the prefecture which governed the area now divided into Guangnan, Funing, and eastern Malipo counties. Xiao Guangnan was the other Nong Zhuang location besides Kuaxi in Yunnan visited by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Zhuang language survey in the late 1950s (Zhang et al 1999).

Though the paved highway now leaves the county seat toward the south, connecting to the inter-provincial highway at Zhujie, the traditional highway traveled until the construction of the new road in the 1990s left the county seat to the west, coming within a kilometer of Xiao Guangnan. Xiao Guangnan’s 610 households, 2470 inhabitants (2006 figures from the community government office) are entirely Nong Zhuang with the exception of one Han family that settled in the village in the 1960s. In addition to this large village, the community government office at Xiao Guangnan governs eight other Nong villages and one Miao village. (Liancheng township itself is 51% Zhuang, with over 30,000 Zhuang people in that one township—that is, more Zhuang that in all of Xichou County.) The community has a total population of 5,259 people in 1,228 households of which only 10 are Han, though there are some additional Han spouses married to Zhuang.

As the village is only 6km from the city of Liancheng, with frequent passing buses (and as of Fall 2006, there is now a Liancheng city bus stop in Xiao Guangnan), the inhabitants do not have a market of their own, but buy and sell most things they need in Liancheng city. Perhaps because of this frequent contact with non-Zhuang people in the city (including many “Sha” or Yei Zhuang people from the northern part of the county, whose Northern Taic language is not fully intelligible to Nong who have not learned it), reportedly all Nong in Xiao Guangnan except for a few over 70 can speak local Chinese.

Another factor explaining their high bilingualism could be the high level of education; reportedly all the children except the handicapped are now attending elementary school (which goes from kindergarten to sixth grade), and a literacy class (in Chinese characters) for women was offered each year until 2005 when they could no longer find enough illiterate women to participate. Most students are able to continue beyond elementary school at one of the several middle schools and high schools in Liancheng city.

Though the village is nearby, most of these student live in a dormitory in town on weeknights as there are many evening study sessions, etc., and thus live among Han, Miao, Yao, and Yei Zhuang classmates, with whom they must speak Han Chinese to communicate.

At the elementary school in Xiao Guangnan there are Han and Miao teachers as well as Nong Zhuang. Except in the kindergarten class (xueqian ban), the teachers are not allowed to address the students in Nong. They must teach only in Chinese (in theory, only in standard Mandarin, but probably some degree of local Chinese is also used).
However, we were told that all residents are also fully fluent in Nong, and we observed mostly Nong being spoken around the village. The idea that some Nong in Xiaoguangnan would not be able to speak Nong was laughable. “It’s impossible that any Nong here doesn’t speak Nong!” we were told. A fair number of Nong from Xiao Guangnan have married with Han or other minority groups. We were told that if the couple settles outside Xiao Guangnan or another Nong village, then the other spouse probably won’t learn Nong, but if they settle in Xiao Guangnan, the non-Nong spouse eventually learns to understand Nong. If the family stays in Xiao Guangnan, regardless of whether it is the father or mother who is Nong, the children will grow up speaking Nong.

Within the village official broadcasts are made in local Chinese, and meetings are also held in local Chinese, though some villagers prefer to speak in Nong during these meetings.

In terms of economic situation, though the road to Guangnan is not paved and Liancheng is not nearly as large or economically prosperous a city as Wenshan, Guangnan is above average for Yunnan Zhuang villages. There are a few small convenience stores in the village (xiao maibu), and a number of villagers have some type of employment in the city. Some of the women of Xiao Guangnan are able to sell their beautiful handcrafts (embroidery, weaving, etc.) in town, mostly through a Zhuang crafts and food products store opened by a Xiao Guangnan family next to the county government building, opposite Liancheng’s Bronze Drum Plaza (Tonggu Guangchang).

3.4.7 Xia Douyue Village in Guangnan County

Zhetu township in western Guangnan County is probably the single township with the largest percentage of Nong Zhuang speakers. According to local government records, 93% of that district is ethnically Zhuang, most of these speakers of Nong Zhuang. As Zhetu is such a strongly Zhuang district, the researchers made a number of visits there during the course of the research period (2005 to 2007) and visited a number of different villages. In this section we will discuss some of the language use characteristics of this district as a whole and then focus on the specifics of Xia Douyue where we conducted a formal interview. Much of what is true of Zhetu district also can be said of the neighboring districts of Nalun (那伦) and Jiumo (旧莫), which are also heavily Zhuang (88% and 67%, respectively), predominately Nong Zhuang-speaking areas.

The administrative and market town of Zhetu district is located 43 km to the west of the county seat on a dirt road and about the same distance north of the larger market town of Zhulin, government seat for Zhulin township. Though the district town is not large, about 4,000 population with two paved streets, it is the cross-roads for the districts to the west and north, namely Zhetu, Dixu and Bada. Historically, the road that runs through Zhulin and Zhetu was the main access road to the county seat of Liancheng. Almost two thirds of the land (70%) is classified as mountainous: lower, flatter areas near water supplies are farmed as rice paddies and wheat and corn fields; higher hillsides are cultivated as Pu’erh tea plantations, and 52% of the land area is still forested.

79 The plaza features a 20-ft. tall replica of a traditional bronze drum such as the Zhuang used to make and still use for various ceremonial purposes.
80 In addition to the Guangnan county districts and townships of Liancheng, Zhetu, Nalun, and Jiumo, where Nong Zhuang form a majority of the total population, there are six more districts/townships with the majority being of Zhuang nationality. However, to our knowledge in these six, Yezi Zhuang (speaking either Guibian or Qiubei Northern Zhuang) predominate. These districts/townships are: Babao (八宝, 53% Zhuang), Zhetai (者太, 55% Zhuang), Banbang (板蚌, 65% Zhuang), Ake (阿科, 74% Zhuang), Bada (八达, 84% Zhuang), and Dixu (底圩, 84% Zhuang) (Zhang 2000).
81 The area is fairly well watered—there are 145 identified rivers and streams in the district!
The district consists of eight administrative communities—a total of 116 villages. Of these, 106 are ethnically Zhuang, seven are Yao, one is Yi, and two are Han. One of the communities, Zhemo (者莫), is predominately “Sha” Yei Zhuang, that is speaking the Guibian Northern Zhuang language, although these Yei Zhuang can also understand and speak Nong to some degree. In 2005 there were a total of 33,460 Zhuang in the district, of which about 5,000 are “Sha”, Guibian Zhuang speakers, and the remainder (around 28,000), are Nong speakers (Zhetu district government figures). There were 599 Han, 1,171 Yao, and 776 Yi for a district total population of 36,711.

Zhetu district seat has a market every six days, at which Nong is the primarily language used. Though Yao, Yei Zhuang and Yi also participate in the market, most of these other language groups speak enough Nong to buy and sell in Nong. Only the Han usually cannot speak Nong, though there are some Han who can speak Nong also. We were told that it is not possible to distinguish the Yei from the Nong based on costume. Though in most Zhuang areas the men (other than the mugong religious leaders) no longer wear a traditional costume, in Zhetu it is not uncommon to see men on market days or festival days wearing the traditional black or dark blue shirts. Most of the women wear their Nong costumes every day, a casual costume for ordinary days and often a more elaborate, more colorful costume on festival days, often with silver plate jewelry. (See Appendix B for photos of costumes). The girls and young women often wear the costume as well, although those who are still going to school usually wear western clothing.

The Zhemo Yei, as well as the Yei of the neighboring districts of Zhetai and Dixu, dress identically to the Zhetu Nong women. The Zhetu Nong call themselves [pʰu²²noŋ⁴⁴], also pronounced [pu²²noŋ⁴⁴], and call the Yei Zhuang [pu²²joi⁴⁴] in Nong, or Shazu (沙族) in Chinese. A Yei official present informed us that the Zhetu Yei Zhuang call themselves [pu²²jei⁴⁴].

The district manages 64 elementary schools, some offering six years of education, some four, and many just first and second grades. The district seat has a middle school with dormitories, and those who graduate from the middle school with good enough grades can continue on to high school at one of the county’s half dozen high schools, the nearest of which are the No. 2 High School in Zhulin or the Nos. 1 or 5 High Schools in Liancheng. There have also been some adult literacy classes in the Zhetu district seat. The vast majority of Zhetu teachers are Zhuang, and they teach the children through Zhuang in grades one through three, as most rural children do not speak much or any Chinese when starting school. By grades four through six the classes are supposed to be conducted entirely in Chinese.

In the district seat itself, most people, even older people and pre-school children, can speak some Wenshan Chinese. However, in the rural villages most of the pre-school children and older people do not speak local Chinese, we were told. Though meetings held in the district seat are conducted usually in Wenshan Chinese, in the villages they are almost always conducted in Zhuang, either Nong or Guibian Zhuang (Yei), according to the make-up of the village. The idea that any Zhuang person in Zhetu might not be able to speak a Zhuang language was considered laughable: “after all, even some of the Han have learned to speak Zhuang!”

In general, we were told, there is less out-marriage in Nong villages in Zhetu than in some other Nong areas, probably largely because there are not that many non-Zhuang people around. When such a couple does settle in a Nong village in Zhetu, the non-Nong spouse (usually Han, Yei Zhuang, or Yao) generally learns to speak Nong within a year or two.

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82 However, the Yei women of Bada and Ake apparently have a somewhat different costume.
The village of Xia Douyue (下斗月) is located almost 60 km from the Guangnan county seat, about 16 km northwest of Zhetu district town, on a narrow, mountainous road subject to mudslides. Xia Douyue is the administrative village for the Douyue community, which consists of three other villages, a total population of 3,723 people in 735 households. Xia Douyue itself has 297 of those households, 1,631 population, so it is a sizable village in its own right. The community’s population is 100% Zhuang, of which almost all are Nong; the only non-Nong resident of Douyue community is a Yei Zhuang teacher at their school.

Considering its remote location in northwest Guangnan County, not really on the way to anywhere except rural Zhetai, and also its homogenous Nong population, Xia Douyue seemed to us one of the most traditional villages we visited. Not only were all the women wearing the local Nong costume, but even all the teenagers and young girls as well. The village relies exclusively on subsistence agriculture, and innovations like electricity are still relatively new. According to the community government, 20% of the adult population is illiterate or “semi-literate” (wenmang / banwenmang: 文盲半文盲). There is a gold mine in the area which is still producing, but it is primarily run by people from Shanghai, Changcun (capital of Jilin province in northwest China) and Inner Mongolia, according to the community officials—not by local Zhuang.

The most frequently visited market is that in Zhetu, though it is quite far away so not everyone goes every time it occurs (every six days, on the Dog and Dragon days). Some also go to the Zhetai market which is even further: 23 km from Douyue. At the Zhetu market, the residents of Douyue speak Nong with everyone and have no difficulties in communication. At the Zhetai market, where the majority are Yei Zhuang, the Douyue folks speak Nong and are basically understood by the Yei Zhuang there, and the Douyue people can understand the Zhetai Yei when they respond in their Northern Zhuang. Though they don’t have many dealings with Miao and Yao people, if they do need to talk to these ethnic groups, they speak Nong or Wenshan Chinese, if both sides are able to speak Chinese.

Every village in the Douyue community has its own elementary school, and all teachers are Zhuang (one Yei, the rest are Nong). The students are first taught in Nong and speak Nong with the other students. Those who continue to middle school live with mostly Nong students and teachers at the middle school dormitory in Zhetu district seat. Quite a few make it to high school, but the people we talked with could only think of two people from Douyue who had gone beyond high school; both had gone to the Kunming Metallurgy College (Kunming Jingong Xueyuan, 昆明金工学院) in the provincial capital.

We were told that 80% of the older people could speak no Chinese whatsoever. Most of the young people can speak some Chinese now, due to the relatively recent phenomenon of working temporarily in the factory towns. The number of young people who have been busing out of the area to do manual labor in factory towns in the east is unprecedented; a local government official has been keeping track and had recorded at the time of our visit in August 2006, already 875 people from the Douyue community had gone outside the village to look for work (out of a total population of 3,723 people, one-fifth of the population). These people, mostly young adults, go to Kunming, Guangdong and Changchun. We were

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83 Actually, there’s a foot-trail through the mountains that connects Douyue to the Zhetu county seat in only about 9 or 10 km. As there are usually only a couple vehicles that pass on the Zhetu-Douyue-Zhetai road, we ended up walking this trail back to Zhetu town to catch a bus to the county seat.

84 A fixed-line telephone first came in 1997 and electricity in 1999, but the village is still not within range of any mobile phone towers, even on the hill tops.

85 As we have not yet conducted linguistic research into the Northern Taic languages of Wenshan, we cannot say for certain which of the two Yunnan Northern Zhuang languages, Qiubei or Guibian, identified by Chinese linguists (Wei and Tan 1980, Wang 1984, Zhang et al 1999), is spoken by these Yei Zhuang.
told that no pre-school children in Douyue could speak any Chinese at all. They start elementary school with no fluency in Chinese whatsoever. When we asked whether anyone in Douyue could not speak Nong, we were told that only the deaf people could not.

### 3.4.8 Summary of Nong Zhuang Language Use Situation

In summary, we can see that although many Nong speak at least Wenshan Chinese fluently, and many speak standard Putonghua (Mandarin) as well, Nong remains the primary language used in intimate domains (home life, among friends, etc.) for most rural Nong Zhuang people in Wenshan prefecture. In areas where the Nong are not a numerical majority, they must use Chinese more frequently to communicate with Han people and other minority ethnic groups, but in areas where they are in the majority, especially the several districts and townships in Guangnan where they account for over three quarters of the population, we see members of the other surrounding ethnic groups actually becoming somewhat fluent in Nong in order to participate in the local markets, etc.

### 3.5 Dai Zhuang Language Use Datapoints

#### 3.5.1 Xiao Minghu Village, Wenshan County (Northern Dai Zhuang)

Xiao Minghu village is located on the northern border of Wenshan County, right in the middle of the northern Dai Zhuang area. The people are known locally as Da Tou Tu, Chinese for “piled headdress Tu”; but call themselves [ʔbu²²daːi¹¹], or “the Dai people”. The northern Dai Zhuang area begins in Matang township and extends north into Pingyuan township and Ashe district of western Yanshan County and Zhongheying township of eastern Kaiyuan County (Honghe Prefecture). Northern Dai Zhuang villages are also found in Laohuilong and Xigu districts in western Wenshan County. Xiao Minghu is one of the villages of the Minghu Community, governed by the Dehou Township government. The Dai Zhuang villages in the Minghu area, as in other Dai Zhuang areas, are scattered among other language groups: Chinese-speaking Han and Hui, Hmong-speaking Miao, Azha and Niesu-speaking Yi, and Nong-speaking Zhuang. Zhuang people make up about one third of the Dehou population but have a slightly larger population than Han in the area. (The township also has Miao, Dai, Yi, Hui and Yao.) Most of Dehou’s Zhuang speak Dai Zhuang, though there are a few Nong Zhuang villages as well, and at least one (Xiao Long) which is mixed Nong and Dai Zhuang. Most Dai Zhuang in Dehou are living in ethnically mixed villages; the village of our research, Xiao Minghu, was one of only four purely Dai Zhuang villages in Dehou township as far as the residents were aware.

The village is 53 kilometers from the Wenshan county seat, and about 2 km on a dirt road from the paved road that connects Wenshan county seat to Pingyuan township. There is a defunct Manganese mine near the village, which is no longer being worked.

The Minghu community consists of six villages (497 households, 2,252 people) of which three are primarily Han, one is Miao, and two are Dai Zhuang (the other is called Xin Haiwei). Xiao Minghu has 99 households (492 people), all of whom are Dai Zhuang, except for two Han spouses, two Nong Zhuang spouses married to Dai Zhuang, and two Han people who recently came to the village from Pingyuan in Yanshan County. The spouses married to Dai Zhuang all can speak the Dai Zhuang language; the two

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86 Dehou township had 10,581 Zhuang out of a total population of 27,846 according to the 1982 Census, the most recent census for which we have district and township level populations (Zhang 2000).

87 There are also two purely Dai Zhuang villages in the community of Yunfeng, which was part of Dehou township until July, 1987 when it was annexed in to Yanshan county (Wenshan Xian Di Ming Zhi 1988:377).
other Han people can speak a little Dai Zhuang, but most people speak to them in Chinese. In Xinhaiwei and the Han villages nearby there are another 187 Dai Zhuang households.

Residents of Xiao Minghu attend the Dehou township market which is on a seven-day week (on Wednesdays), as well as the Lelong market (a Han and Miao community within Dehou) which is on Tuesdays. At these markets there are Miao, Han, Nong Zhuang and Yi people (Azha/Phula and Niesu). The Dai Zhuang generally speak the local Chinese dialect at these markets, and none of these other ethnic groups understands Dai Zhuang.

The community of Minghu has two elementary schools, both of which have Miao and Han students as well as Zhuang. Xiao Minghu had its own first and second grade school attended only by Zhuang students until 2003, when it was closed. Now Xiao Minghu students attend the primary school in Minghu about a kilometer away. Students who continue on to middle school go to Dehou and to high school in Wenshan county seat. About 30 children from the village were currently in elementary school—ten in middle school, four or five in high school and three in university or technical college. Students of all levels study with non-Zhuang students, and Chinese is the language of instruction and communication between students at all these schools.

There is no one in the village who is unable to speak the Dai Zhuang language. Likewise, we were told that there is no one in the village who cannot speak Wenshan Chinese, even old people and 3-year-olds can all speak local Chinese. However, not everyone can understand Standard Chinese (Putonghua); for example, some people cannot follow national TV shows in Mandarin. When important announcements are made in the village, they are usually made in Dai Zhuang, and meetings are convened in Dai Zhuang also.

Like elsewhere, many young people go away to work in places such as Zhejiang, Guangdong and Fujian provinces, Shanghai, Kunming, Wenshan county seat and Mengzi County. But most come back at least once a year and when they return and settle down, they can all still speak Dai Zhuang. The older people we interviewed felt that the young people’s Dai Zhuang is as standard as the adults; in fact, it is exactly the same as that of the older people. All the women in the village still have the traditional clothing and hats, even the young women, but the young women only wear them for festivals and weddings, and often with jeans or slacks instead of with skirts.

The Xiao Minghu residents we interviewed felt strongly that Zhuang people should speak Zhuang. The party secretary spontaneously brought up the issue of having a writing system without our mentioning it. He feels the Dai Zhuang language should be continued but that it cannot continue without a writing system. He had never heard of a writing system for Zhuang. He hopes there will be literacy classes in Zhuang orthography and feels that being able to write the language would be very useful for keeping the language alive and recording their culture, such as songs. (Some residents of Xiao Minghu, such as our host, Mr. Wang Zhineng, have already produced videos themselves of their traditional singing, with subtitles in Chinese explaining the meaning of the songs.)

3.5.2 *Laochangpo village, Maguan County (Southern Dai Zhuang)*

The village of Laochangpo, or [tai⁵¹ʔdua²¹pu⁵⁵] as it is called by its inhabitants in Dai Zhuang, is a small, remote village up in the mountains above the town of Tangfang. The village has 21 households of which 18 are Dai ([ʔbu²²dai⁵¹]) Zhuang and three are Dai Zhuang-speaking Han.88 The official village

88 We looked for a 100% Dai Zhuang village but most of the Dai Zhuang villages in Maguan, such as Laochangpo, are mixed ethnically.
population was 96 but probably there were fewer people than this in the village in January when we visited, as the workers had not yet returned to the village for the Spring Festival holiday. Everyone in the village (including Han) can speak Dai Zhuang (the Han to varying degrees), and all can also speak the local Chinese dialect (which is similar to the dialects of Southwest Mandarin spoken in the other counties of Wenshan prefecture).

Though most Yunnan Zhuang live at relatively lower altitudes, along rivers and rice paddies, this Dai Zhuang village is higher than most of the surrounding villages. The community town of Tangfang has a thriving business in sweet oranges and tangerines but the village of Laochang does not have orange groves and survives by subsistence agriculture, some logging when such is allowed, and by sending off young people to work in factories.

The Southern Dai Zhuang of Maguan, Malipo and Xichou counties have been referred to by the Chinese name of Jian Tou Tu尖头土, or “Pointy Headdress Tu” for the women’s headdress. To the knowledge of the Laochangpo residents, there are about 20 Southern Dai Zhuang villages in northeastern Maguan County, all in Laonan Township—about ten more in the extreme south of the county on the border with Vietnam in Jinchang, Xiaobazi, and Jiahanqing Districts, another half dozen on the southwest edge of Xichou County in Xinnmajie District, and half a dozen in the northwest corner of Malipo County in Daping Township.89 (See Appendix B for village lists.)

The Laochangpo residents have frequent contact with these other Dai Zhuang and say that the women’s costumes in these areas are exactly the same as theirs, and the Dai Zhuang (probably classified in Vietnam’s Tày nationality) across the border from them in Vietnam also share the same costume. They have frequent contacts with the Vietnamese speakers as well as with the Central and Northern Dai Zhuang speakers of Wenshan County and can communicate with all these areas in their own Dai Zhuang dialect with no comprehension problems.

The Community of Tangfang has 20 villages (26 production teams), with 884 households and a combined population of 3,667. Eight of these villages are primarily Nong Zhuang, seven are primarily Dai Zhuang, seven are primarily Han and four Miao, though there are a lot of mixed villages and intermarriage among these four groups. The residents of Laochang do their marketing at the Tangfang market, which takes place every six days, and they buy and sell with Han, Miao and Nong Zhuang neighbors. A few make the longer commute to the township market in Nanlao, where they encounter Han, Miao, Nong Zhuang, Yao and Phula Yi people ([bu²²pi³³] in Dai Zhuang). Although Dai Zhuang will speak Dai among each other at the market, as elsewhere, the local dialect of Chinese is the most common language used in the markets. Likewise the Dai Zhuang students study with members of other language groups and use primarily Chinese in and around school.

Although the Dai Zhuang in Maguan usually live with other ethnic groups, they feel they are maintaining their language and culture, and they say that the Dai Zhuang population in Maguan County is larger than that of Malipo County (Laochangpo is about 10km from the border with Malipo County). A bit over 50% of Nanlao Township’s relatively small population is Zhuang, but this is divided among Nong Zhuang and Dai Zhuang speakers. Han and Miao are the other large ethnic groups in Tangfang community, with a few Phula Yi and Yao villages as well. In the other Southern Dai Zhuang districts and townships (Maguan County’s Jinchang, Xiaobazi, Jiahanqing, Malipo County’s Daping, and Xichou’s Xinnmajie) the Zhuang

89 Edmondson, Gregerson and Nguyen (2000) also reports a small population probably speaking the same language in the Vietnamese town of Muongkhang, (孟康 in Chinese), near Maguan county’s Xiaobazi District and Hekou county’s Bozhuqing district, and Zhongzhai Zhuang Autonomous district. As we did not do fieldwork in Hekou county or Vietnam we cannot confirm that these are also Southern Dai Zhuang-speaking areas.
are not in the majority, with more Han than Zhuang in each of these districts and townships. In no district or community do Southern Dai Zhuang speakers form a majority, so it seems that most Southern Dai Zhuang, like those of Laochangpo, must necessarily interact with other ethnic groups on a daily basis.

As far as educational opportunity goes, there is no elementary school in Laochangpo itself, but there are six in Tangfang community. These elementary schools have basic dormitory facilities for the students who live too far away to walk each day. For those who are able to continue on, there is a middle school (with a dormitory) in Nanlao and a high school in the Maguan County seat. At the time of our visit, the Maguan County education department had been able to offer free education for grades one through nine for several years, thanks to a national government program to increase the educational levels in national border counties. However, high school tuition fees were still prohibitively high for many families.

The Dai Zhuang of Laochangpo intermarry with Han people relatively frequently (there are three Han households in the village), and if the couple settles in Laochangpo, the Han spouse then learns to speak Dai Zhuang, as Dai Zhuang is the main language spoken in the village both by older and younger people, both informally and in formal announcements and village meetings. During our stay we observed the Dai Zhuang residents primarily speaking Dai Zhuang among themselves and when addressing children. The few Han residents seemed to usually speak Chinese but understand the Dai Zhuang response. Many young people do manual labor in far-off provinces such as Anhui, Shanghai and Guangdong, but these usually return home eventually and still speak Dai Zhuang when they call on the telephone or return home. The young people do not speak Dai Zhuang differently than the older people, though only the older people can now sing the traditional Zhuang songs.

The Laochangpo residents are aware that a writing system was developed for Nong Zhuang. As for them, a few of the older people have tried to write down songs using Chinese characters, but they feel that a better way of writing would be useful so that they would be able to write whatever they could say.

### 3.5.3 Songshupo village, Guangnan County (Northeastern Dai Zhuang)

The Dai Zhuang of Songshupo village in Zhulin township of Guangnan County represent the far northwestern corner of the Dai Zhuang area. Previous works mentioning the Dai Zhuang language (i.e. Wen-Ma Southern Zhuang) did not mention any speakers in Guangnan, but several Dai Zhuang in Wenshan County had heard of Dai Zhuang villages in Guangnan County and the researchers had noticed women in costumes similar to those of other Dai Zhuang while passing through Zhulin en route to the Nong Zhuang district of Zhetu. The Dai Zhuang of Songshupo confirmed that they are indeed part of the same ethnolinguistic group as the Dai Zhuang of Wenshan, Yanshan, Maguan and Malipo counties, and that their ancestors six or seven generations back had come to their present location from Dai Zhuang areas of Pingyuan township in western Yanshan County. There are still close ties, with frequent intermarriage with Northern Dai Zhuang villages in western Yanshan and northern Wenshan counties. One current Songshupo family moved there from Matang township in Wenshan County. The Dai Zhuang of Songshupo call themselves [ʔdai³¹].

Besides Songshupo, there are six other completely Dai Zhuang villages in Guangnan County, all of which are also in Zhulin township: Shazitang (沙子塘, pop. 320), Huangtupo (黄土坡, pop. 100), Xinzhai (新寨, pop. 1,200), Raomal (绕马路, pop. over 300), Meihuipo (煤灰坡, pop. 100), Tangzibian (塘子边, pop. >400), and also a number of villages in which Dai Zhuang are mixed with other ethnic groups. In the completely Dai Zhuang villages all the children speak Dai Zhuang, but many of the children in the mixed villages cannot. Laojiezi (老街子, known locally as Laogaizi), the larger village neighboring Songshupo,

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90 Most of the mixed villages are in Zhulin township, but there are also a few in neighboring Wuzhu district (五珠乡).
has about 30 Dai Zhuang households but most have switched to speaking Chinese, according to our local government escort, who is an ethnically Dai Zhuang resident himself. The Guangnan Dai Zhuang we interviewed felt there were no dialect differences among the Guangnan Dai Zhuang villages. We estimate there are approximately three thousand Dai Zhuang speakers in Guangnan County. (See Appendix A for maps.)

Songshupo village itself had a population of 247 people at the time of our visit, living in 51 households. Of these, four households are ethnically Han, and 47 are Dai Zhuang. Everyone, including the Han residents, can speak Dai Zhuang and everyone can also speak the local Chinese dialect, including the oldest residents and pre-school children. Songshupo is only 7 km from the town of Zhulin, which is the largest market town in western Guangnan County, so the residents have frequent contact with members of other language groups. Their community, Bainipo (白泥塘村委会), consists of 11 villages of which three are Dai Zhuang, three are Nong Zhuang, one is Miao, and four are ethnically mixed (Han, Miao, Dai Zhuang and Yi). The community has three elementary schools (one of which goes through sixth grade), and Zhulin town nearby has both a middle school and a high school (Guangnan County No. 2 High School) with dormitories, where students study and live with students of other ethnic groups and generally use Wenshan Chinese.91 Approximately 80% of Songshupo children do some middle school study, and 20% go on to high school.

As the Dai Zhuang population in Guangnan County is quite small, many people marry with other ethnic groups. In the past most Guangnan Dai Zhuang married other Dai Zhuang, often from Yanshan and Wenshan counties, but now many men and women marry with nearby Nong Zhuang, Han and Phula Yi. (Miao, Yao and Hui people also live in the area, but our interviewees could not think of any Dai Zhuang marriages with these groups.)

As elsewhere, Songshupo people go to locations in the east of the country, such as Shanghai, Zhejiang and Guangdong, to work and earn cash, but they eventually return and can still speak Dai Zhuang.92 Village announcements are made in Dai Zhuang, and meetings are usually also conducted in Dai Zhuang except for when higher level officials who do not understand Dai Zhuang are present.

### 3.5.4 Niutouzhai and Shuichezhai villages, Wenshan County (Central Dai Zhuang)

There are about three dozen Central Dai Zhuang villages, all within the boundaries of Kaihua City, in the communities of Libujia (里布戛村委会), Gaomo (高末村委会), Hongqi (红旗村委会), Gaodeng (高登村委会), Panzhihua (攀枝花村委会) and Wenxinjie (文新街村委会), whose residents call themselves [ʔbu²²ʔda̤²¹/¹¹]. Though visitors to Wenshan usually encounter these so-called “Ping Tou Tu” (Flat Headdress Tu) first before visiting other Zhuang areas,93 we have left this village profile for last as the sociolinguistic situation of these Dai Zhuang villages is quite different from the majority of Dai Zhuang villages, due to their proximity to the urban center of Wenshan with all the economic, educational and societal influence that comes with it. Though all the Dai Zhuang we met elsewhere were fully bilingual in Wenshan Chinese, they all consistently indicated that Dai Zhuang was the primary language used in intimate domains such as home life, friendship and village functions and that all children in the

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91 Because Zhulin is so close, the Songshupo students only live in the dormitories on weeknights and return to the village on weekends.
92 The Songshupo participants found the idea comical that they might not be able to speak Dai Zhuang after a long stay away.
93 For example, the Zhuang volume (Gao 2001) of a 2001 book series covering Yunnan’s 26 official nationalities entitled “Yunnan Ethnic Village Research” (《云南民族村寨调查》) bases its research almost entirely on the Dai Zhuang village of Jiupingba, on the outskirts of Wenshan city.
other Dai Zhuang villages are growing up fully fluent in Dai Zhuang. The situation of the Central Dai Zhuang in their three dozen villages surrounding the prefecture and county government seat of Kaihua is quite different: here we were told that, at most, one in ten ethnically Dai Zhuang children can speak the Dai Zhuang language.

We conducted our interviews initially with residents of the village Shuichezhai (水车寨) which is on the southern side of Kaihua city. At the time of the interviews in late 2005, this village still maintained rice paddies and fields surrounding the houses on the edge of the city; however, residents told us most residents had already sold their fields and some their homes to developers. By summer of 2007, the original houses of village were already surrounded by the high rise buildings in various stages of completeness, and very soon the village will be effectively a neighborhood of Wenshan city. Shuichezhai then had around 150 households, between 600 and 700 population, but there were many Han residents in addition to the Dai Zhuang.

When we discovered that virtually none of the children in Shuichezhai could speak Dai Zhuang any longer, we asked about Central Dai Zhuang villages where children could still speak Dai Zhuang and were told that there were only a couple left, one of which was Niutouzhai (牛头寨) a bit further south in Libujia Community. Indeed the ethnic composition of Niutouzhai was close to 100% Dai Zhuang, yet even there we discovered that very few of the children can speak Dai Zhuang, even though some understand it.

Niutouzhai is a kilometer or so further south, and west of the small river that meanders through Wenshan city. It is set back further from the highway that leaves the city to the south on its way to Maguan, Xichou and Malipo counties as well as the Vietnamese border, so its existence as an independent village may last a bit longer, though it seems likely also to eventually be swallowed up by the rapidly growing city. (The village is directly behind a huge Sanqi Herbal Medicine Trade Center completed in 2005.)

Niutouzhai has 127 villages with a population of 760, all of which are Dai Zhuang. The only non-Dai Zhuang in the village are six or seven Han wives married to Dai Zhuang men. Niutouzhai is one of eight Dai Zhuang villages in the Libujia community, but only four are still predominately Dai Zhuang anymore (other ethnic groups in Libujia community are Han, Miao, Dai and Niesu/Lolo Yi). Although almost everyone in the village is Dai Zhuang and all old people can speak Dai Zhuang, Niutouzhai residents felt that only five to 10% of their pre-school aged children can speak Dai Zhuang. The language most commonly used in the village is Wenshan Chinese “because we live next to Wenshan city”, though some meetings are convened in Dai Zhuang as all the older people speak it. All their marketing they do in Wenshan city (which has several daily wet markets and numerous stores), and it is not uncommon for outside vendors to visit their village. Although a few people go to eastern provinces to do manual labor, most are able to get jobs in Wenshan city and not leave the village.

Reportedly 100% of the children attend elementary school as the first through sixth grade school at Libujia is less than a kilometer away and even the disabled students can go to Wenshan city’s school for the disabled nearby. Most of the students continue to middle school as several middle schools are within walking distance in the city. About 40% of those who complete middle school are able to continue on to high school.

In both Shuichezhai and Niutouzhai, the economic and educational levels are obviously above those of the more remote villages. Though many people in both villages do various types of farming (especially growing vegetables and raising hogs and poultry), and are able to sell their products directly to the markets of Wenshan city, many residents also have other part- or full-time employment in the city and one can see motorized vehicles and modernized homes in the two villages. The Central Dai Zhuang are
clearly being economically and linguistically assimilated into the urban Chinese-speaking population of Wenshan city.

In accessing language use, vitality and bilingualism through this type of survey, one is always quite limited by relatively little time we have to observe the sociolinguistic situation. Though we try to understand on-going trends and the directionality of the changing situation, we must largely depend upon the reminiscences of older residents. In the case of the Central Dai Zhuang, however, we actually have a small bit of observation by an amateur foreign ethnographer who visited the Central Dai area almost a century ago, in May 1910. William Clifton Dodd, an American missionary, fluent in the Chiang Mai Thai dialect (Northern Thai) of northern Thailand traveled on foot through various Daic areas of Yunnan, Guangdong and Guangxi, including K'aihua Fu and Guangnan Fu, the two Qing dynasty government prefectures covering most of modern day Wenshan prefecture. Upon arriving in K'aihua after a four day walk from Mengzi, Dodd writes:

The plateau character of the country continues, with many fertile little valleys, and prosperous villages everywhere. We found some Tai people en route, and doubtless there are many more at a little distance from off the main road. We found plenty of Tai in the K'ai Huā plain. But it was with difficulty that we could find words in common with them94 though we noted down a few in the short time we had for investigation. They are unlike the Red River valley and Black River valley Tai, in that they say they have adopted the Chinese religion and literary culture. This may have been confined however, to the one village which we visited near the town (1996:91).

So already in 1910, it seems as though the Central Dai Zhuang near K'aihua city were being heavily influenced by the urban Chinese culture and language. Thus almost a century later, it is not surprising to find so few children in the Central Dai Zhuang area able to speak Zhuang, perhaps we should be surprised that the adults have held on to the language this long. We do not have good records however, on how many people of Dai Zhuang ancestry in this area have already so assimilated into Chinese culture and language so that they are no longer identified as Central Dai Zhuang.

3.5.5 Dai Zhuang Language Use Conclusions

In all the locations we visited, we found that virtually all Dai Zhuang speakers are fluent in Wenshan Chinese, and usually must use Chinese on a daily basis as the Dai Zhuang seldom live in ethnically homogenous communities or townships. In the Central Dai Zhuang area around K'aihua City in Wenshan County, the Dai Zhuang language is endangered with few children learning to speak it. However, in the other villages we visited there seems to be a stable bilingualism, with Dai Zhuang remaining the language of preference when no outsiders are present. With a population of over 100,000 speakers remaining, it is too soon to predict the disappearance of this language. The population of speakers is still large enough to maintain a viable bilingual speech community if the speakers choose to consciously continue to pass the language on to their children and if the speakers are able to access language development resources to strengthen the language use in certain domains, e. g. traditional song and poetry, oral history, family life, etc.

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94 Dodd and his companions spoke the Yuan Thai language of northern Thailand.
3.6 The Min Zhuang village of Guixun-Anhe

We had heard that there were also Nong Zhuang speakers in the far southeast of Wenshan prefecture, in Funing County’s Langheng work committee. However, upon arriving there, we discovered there were three Zhuang languages spoken in Langheng—none of them Nong or Dai Zhuang. One of them, called by its speakers [pu²²min²⁴] and [kən³³min²⁴], appeared to be a central Tai variety (as evidence by its aspirated plosives, etc.), so we decided to stay and research this group for several days.

The Min Zhuang of Guixun-Anhe call their language [kan²²min²⁴] or [min²⁴song⁵³], and they are a linguistic minority within the Langheng district, though Langheng is 87% Zhuang (Zhang 2000). In addition to Guixun-Anhe, the Min Zhuang were aware of ten other Min Zhuang villages: Sankeshu, Xionggu, Shangmabu, Tianfang, Gezao, Gecai, Bagan, Na’en, Longnong; all in Langheng. However, the most numerous language group in the area is the Yei Zhuang speakers, who in this area call themselves [kan⁵⁵jui²⁴] or [kan⁵⁵jei²⁴], and who are known in Chinese as bu Tu, Tuzu, or Sharen (布土，土族，沙人, not to be mistaken with the Dai Zhuang speakers, who are also known as Tuzu,土族), and whose dialect is known to Chinese linguists as the Guibian sub-dialect of Northern Zhuang. In addition another apparently northern Tai language group called Ngau Zhuang, who call themselves [kan⁵⁵ŋua⁵³] or [bu ŋua⁵³], live in six villages in the Langheng area: Longnei (龙内), Nongliu (弄流), Shangnong (上农), Gegen (戈根), Dinghuang (定皇), Tunlan (吞兰). Finally the Min Zhuang were also aware of a few other Zhuang villages that did not belong to any of these three groups: the Pomiro [pʰo³³mi⁵⁵do⁵³] Zhuang live in the Langhen village of Nalian Xin Zhai (那连新寨) as well as in neighboring Napo County (那坡县) in Guangxi province, and the Gang Get ([kan⁵⁵ket²²] Zhuang, in Anliang village (安良)). Finally there is at least one woman in Anhe from another Zhuang group called Tianbau ([tʰjen²⁴pou⁵⁵], who call their language Gang Nong ([kan⁵⁵non⁵³], though it does not seem to be the same language as the Nong Zhuang spoken further west, as this woman understood none of our Nong Zhuang recorded text tests, but she did understand quite a bit of a recorded text in the Yang Zhuang language of the Jingxi county seat (Guangxi province). She was born and grew up in Guichao township of Funing County (east of the county seat of Xinzhai), where the Tianbau group are somewhat numerous, but had lived in Anhe twenty years since her marriage to a Min man, and now both understood and spoke Min Zhuang. She seemed to speak no Chinese, so we communicated with her through the interpretation of one of the Min schoolteachers. Lu and Nong (1998) record the Tianbau people migrated into Funing from Tianbao County (modern day Debao County in Guangxi province) toward the end of the Ming (1368–1644 AD) and beginning of the Qing dynasties (1644–1911 AD) because of famine and destruction from war and have since spread out widely through the county. It is interesting that the Tianbau still maintain a distinctive identity, and we are interested in the fact that this woman was able to understand the Jingxi Yang text, though further testing is needed to confirm that the Funing Tianbau Zhuang language variety is indeed a dialect of Yang Zhuang.

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95 Langheng was formerly a district, under the Funing county government, but was recently combined into Tianbeng township, so the Langheng government is now classed as a “work committee”, under the township government but above the village community (cunweihui) level.

96 [kan³³] can mean “person” in Zhuang, or be the measure word for persons, and some Zhuang groups use the word also to mean “people, ethnic group”, cf. Zhang et al. (1999).

97 Technically Langheng is no longer a district (xiang,乡) but rather a work committee under the township of Tianbeng. Since it was previously a district level entity (under the county government) it is still referred to as a district locally, and the attractive mountain town of Langheng is a significant sized market town.

98 Information about the Langheng Yei (Guibian) and Ngau Zhuang language groups was provided by officials in the Langheng government office who are mother tongue speakers of these varieties. They felt their two languages were more similar than the other Zhuang languages in the area, yet linguistically and historically distinct from one another. Both these speakers pronounced basic Zhuang words without aspiration, indicating that they belong to the northern branch of Tai (e.g. Ngau Zhuang: “sun”: [tɕɑŋ³³wɑn⁵⁵], “eat rice”: [kan³³han³¹]).
The village of Guixun-Anhe (called “Aiha” by its residents) belongs to the Balong village community and is the site of the community government and school. Guixun-Anhe had been chosen as a poverty alleviation site by the government, and at the time of our research trip, a new community government office building and elementary school had already been completed. Forty-nine new brick houses were under construction, funded by the national government and built by the villagers. The Balong community consists of 470 households with a population of 2,269, of which a majority are Zhuang and a minority Han, Miao, and Yao. The community is divided into 23 “small groups” (xiaozu, 小组), of which 13 are entirely Zhuang. Among Balong’s Zhuang, the majority speak Min and smaller groups speak Guibian (Yei) and Ngau. Guixun-Anhe itself is entirely Min with the exception of a few spouses from other Zhuang language groups.

The residents do most of their marketing at the Langheng market, where the main language used is Guibian Northern Zhuang (Yei), which most of the Min Zhuang can understand and speak to varying degrees. Some also go to the township market at Tianbeng, though this is farther and there speak Guibian (Yei) as well, though when dealing with non-Zhuang, those who are able to speak some Chinese may use local Chinese. However, many Min Zhuang do not speak Chinese, and many of the surrounding Han, Miao and Yao can understand Guibian (Yei) Zhuang. (The Funing County television station has a half hour nightly news broadcast in Guibian Yei Zhuang.) There are not many from Balong market in the county seat of Xinhua as it is 70 km away without regular bus service.

In addition to the newly constructed kindergarten through fourth grade school at Anhe itself, the community has two other elementary schools, offering the first two years of school to those young children in the surrounding mountain villages who cannot walk all the way to the Anhe school. Those who are able to continue to fifth grade must live in the dormitory of the Langheng elementary school and can return home on the weekends (two-hour walk). Langheng also has a middle school with a dormitory, but for high school the students must live in the county seat of Xinhua. The people we interviewed could only think of nine people in the entire community who had studied beyond middle school.

We observed parents speaking to children in both Min Zhuang and local Chinese, but only observed children responding in Min. Grandparents seemed to exclusively speak in Min, and the children spoke Min among themselves. The kindergarten teacher, who is Min herself, told us that about half of her students can speak some Chinese upon beginning kindergarten, and she teaches them primarily through Min at that level, though from first grade on, the teachers (most of whom are Min, though not all) only speak to the students in Chinese during class hours. The students are allowed to respond to the teachers in either Min or Chinese in the early years however, according to their Chinese ability.

There is a Han government official assigned to Balong community, and some Han construction workers temporarily living in Anhe, managing the poverty alleviation project. Their impression was that most Anhe residents could speak Chinese, but when we were out of the government office and visited people in their homes, we were told that many middle aged women could not understand any Chinese. Public announcements and local government meetings however, are currently conducted in Chinese for the benefit of the Han present.

99 The Funing county dialect of Chinese has some significant differences from that of the western side of the prefecture, though to our knowledge, except for Bo’ai township in northeast Funing, the Funing dialect is still a variety of Southwest Mandarin (Xinan Guanhua).
3.7 Summary of the Wenshan Zhuang Language Use Situation

Although language attitudes were not a large focus of our research, almost without exception the attitudes that Zhuang people expressed toward their language and culture were positive. In terms of the vitality of the Zhuang language, it is not threatened by a poor cultural self-esteem, nor by pejorative attitudes toward their language. The vast majority of Zhuang are proud to be Zhuang, and while they might demote their language to the category of a “dialect” due to its lack of widely-used, standardized orthography, no one felt the need to hide the fact that they were fluent in Zhuang, as linguists have encountered among some language groups in other areas of the world.

Thankfully the Zhuang are not threatened by war, famine or wide-spread natural disasters at the moment. The most significant factor likely to significantly affect the Zhuang language ecology situation is instead the increasing level of Chinese bilingualism, due to their increasing integration into the national culture and economy. We see three main factors leading to increased bilingualism in Chinese: greater contact with other ethnic groups locally, formal elementary and secondary education, and young people moving outside the area temporarily or (less frequently) permanently for wage labor.

In many areas, the Zhuang villages have been mixed with other ethnic groups for many centuries. Though the Zhuang are considered to be the original inhabitants of the Wenshan Prefecture area, Han and Yi presence goes back at least a millennium. Small numbers of Han arrived in the Song dynasties to regulate China’s southern frontier, and the various Yi groups’ presence in the area is probably even older, going back to the time of the Nanzhao kingdom (c. 830 AD, Pelkey et al. 2005:4). However, the early Han in Wenshan often assimilated into the Zhuang, as Lu and Nong (1998) explains:

In addition to these migrations there were also various military and commerce personnel who settled in Funing at various periods, especially in the towns, and became assimilated into the local Zhuang. The northern Song emperor Renzong (仁宗) dispatched Han troops from Zhejiang to the Funing region to put down Nong Zhigao’s (侬智高) insurrectionary army. By the Ming and Qing period many Han had assimilated into the Zhuang. The Shen chieftain clan (沈氏土司家族), who were the hereditary magistrates of Fuzhou (富州, modern-day Funing County), were one of these families.

Though there may have been some assimilation between the Yi and the Zhuang, and with the Miao and Yao who arrived later (mostly in the Qing dynasty), these ethnic groups seemed to maintain their differences more historically. However, the last two centuries have seen a much greater influx of settlers to Wenshan from other parts of China, most notably of Han people, especially since 1950. In 1951 Zhuang made up four-fifths of all people in Funing County (81%, Lu and Nong 1998), whereas by 1957 only 58% of that county’s population was Zhuang. Since then the Zhuang population has remained at slightly over half that county’s total population (56.19% in 2003; Yunnan Province 2004). In the other counties the percentage of Zhuang relative to the total population is even less, and this situation, combined with an increasingly networked market economy, causes us to see relatively few areas where a Zhuang speaker can successfully function only in a Zhuang language.

In describing the various villages we visited in the course of this research, we may be struck by the number of students who are not able to study at middle or high school, either due to geographical distance from the available secondary schools or due to economic difficulties in paying the school fees. However,

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100 Other, smaller ethnic groups such as the Mongolians and Gelao also have a long history in Wenshan.
101 During the tumultuous years of 1957–1963 the number of Zhuang people in Funing did not increase, according to Lu and Nong (1998). In fact, during the years 1958 to 1960 the Zhuang population of Funing decreased by over 7,000 people.
we should not lose sight of the fact that the vast majority of Zhuang in Wenshan do now have basic elementary education (at least the first two years, often up to sixth grade), both within walking distance of their village and either free or relatively inexpensive. The year 2000 national census found that only six percent of Zhuang above the age of six have never attended any form of schooling, which is actually over a percentage point lower than the national average and also the figure for the Han nationality. Looking only at those Zhuang 20 years or older, almost eight percent have received no schooling, and of those Zhuang 60 and over (born before 1941, who lived through World War II and the Chinese Civil War, a full one-third have not received any schooling (of those still living in 2000). However, when we look only at those Zhuang aged six to nineteen in year 2000, we find that less than two percent have had no schooling.

So in the past half century, and especially since China’s opening and reform movement in the 1980s, there has been a remarkable increase in the percentage of Zhuang with access to at least some basic education (almost always at least in part via the Chinese written or spoken language), and this undoubtedly has an effect on Zhuang bilingualism as well.

Though we did not focus extensively on gender differences in bilingualism during our field research, occasionally it was mentioned to us that a higher percentage of Zhuang men are fluent in Chinese than women. Among those Zhuang who are functionally monolingual in Zhuang, our impression based on several years’ residence in the area is that there is a significantly higher number of women than men, though we have encountered both older and younger men who seem to be functionally monolingual in Zhuang (either because they cannot speak Chinese, or they are not confident enough in their Chinese ability to use Chinese if they can avoid it). Since there are currently no special taboos prohibiting Zhuang women from having market and other contacts with members of other language groups or from traveling elsewhere to earn wages, this difference is most likely due primarily to historical disparities in education between girls and boys, something which is not unique to the Zhuang, of course. While only 2.6% of Zhuang men and boys aged six and over report having had no education, nearly 10% of women and girls over six have had no education. Among those over the age of sixty, the difference is more striking with over half those women reporting no education but only 15% of older Zhuang men. However, among the current generation of students age six to nineteen in 2000, the disparity has been reduced to tenths of a percentage point: 1.81% Zhuang boys and 2.12% of Zhuang girls reported never having gone to school.

As Zhuang in this age category account for nearly a third of all Zhuang age six and above, bilingualism disparity between Zhuang women and men may be decreasing. However, at the middle school and high school levels, the disparity between boys and girls is greater, and these national figures include both urban and rural Zhuang, for whom the educational situations are often vastly different. (Census figures are from National Bureau of Statistics 2003.)

Finally, the third factor that we feel may be increasing the level of Chinese bilingualism among Wenshan Zhuang, as well as among other minority language groups in China, is the relatively recent phenomenon of mass seasonal migration of laborers from the countryside to the urban factory areas of China in the east and south. Due to various factors, probably including the low prices of non-specialized agriculture goods such as rice, wheat, corn and soy on the world market, increased population density in a mountainous area due to domestic migrations, increased need for personal capital in China’s new market economy and increased material expectations, many Zhuang now feel that it is impossible to support their families

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102 According to the national government, since 2006, all rural schools in Yunnan province ought to be offering free education for first through ninth grades and students from poor families also are to receive free textbooks and subsidized room and board, but as of Spring 2007 both elementary and middle school students in some areas of the prefecture were still being required to pay various fees to attend school. (People’s Daily Online, 23 December 2006: http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200603/05/eng20060305_248042.html)

103 The national percentages of unschooled for boys and girls also show three-tenths of a percent disparity as well: 1.89% boys versus 2.29% girls.
purely through agriculture with the amount of land available to them. Therefore almost every rural Zhuang family has at least one member going off to da gong (打工)—that is, to perform wage labor somewhere outside the area each year. While some of these workers find jobs in the prefecture city of Kaihua (Wenshan) or in the provincial capital of Kunming, most make three- or four-day arduous sleeper bus and train rides to factories in eastern provinces such as Guangdong, Fujian, Zhejiang, Jiangsu, or Shanghai. Though some are able to find jobs that pay 1000 yuan (Reminbi) or more a month (about $140 USD), live cheaply with numerous roommates, and bring home large sums which it might take a Wenshan farmer five or ten years to earn, too many others have difficulty finding work, end up with exploitive bosses or dangerous working conditions, and arrive home poorer than when they left after paying the various bus tickets and hostel charges on the return journey. Most do return home eventually though, either by Spring Festival (Chinese New Year) the following year or after several years, as the living costs in the boomtowns of the east are much higher than those in rural Wenshan and steeply increasing. Though we have no statistical data by which to gage the effect of this seasonal migration to the areas where the Zhuang languages are of very little use, almost certainly those young people who go off to dagong for a year or more return more fluent in Chinese than when they left.

So whether Zhuang young people are able to stay in school through high school or beyond, turn to farming like their parents and buy and sell their products to neighboring Han, Miao, Yi, and Yao peoples, or head to the “wild east” to try their fortunes in the sweat shops and computer chip factories, very few Zhuang young people today are able to pass a week without needing to speak some dialect of Chinese in addition to their own Zhuang mother tongue. Most Zhuang feel that in 21st century China the ability to speak Chinese is essential. Not only is Chinese the official language of the country in which they live, it is a world language, a language officially used by the United Nations and other international bodies, and a language through which its speakers can access information on almost any subject on earth.

As Bradley and Bradley point out (2002:16), “bi- and multilingualism and the biculturalism that often goes with it, give speakers intellectual, emotional and social advantages over monolinguals, in addition to situational and sometimes economic advantages resulting from a knowledge of several languages.” If the Zhuang speakers can become bilingual in Chinese, while retaining their heritage languages, the benefits will be great for both their personal and cultural development. However, as in other parts of the world, in the eyes of a few Zhuang monolingualism in the national language is viewed as the desirable norm, based on the misconception that retention of the minority language necessarily hinders complete acquisition of the national language. The heritage languages can be viewed as liabilities to their children’s chances of economic success and career development. In light of these factors we are forced to ask the question of whether the Zhuang languages are likely to survive the next century as more than just nostalgic memories in the minds of the oldest members of the community.

3.8 How Threatened or Endangered are the Central Taic Languages of Wenshan Prefecture?

Though it is easy to find urban Sinocized Zhuang or Han Chinese who predict a rapid demise for the Zhuang languages within a single generation, or to find traditional elders in villages who predict that “the Zhuang will always speak Zhuang,” a goal of the present research is to get beyond such anecdotal reactions and examine the language use evidence in light of the findings of other linguists elsewhere.

While the subfield of sociolinguistics dedicated to the study of language vitality and maintenance issues is a relatively young one, it is one that is becoming the focus of quite a bit of attention as the world wakes up to the rapid reduction of linguistic diversity taking place as a result of globalization and other factors. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’s Intangible Cultural
Heritage project website, over half of the world’s languages are in danger of disappearing, with a current rate of one language disappearing from use every two weeks.\textsuperscript{104} There is now an increasing collection of academic writing on this issue. Time does not permit a comprehensive review of the literature on the subject, but the interested reader is directed to the many works of Joshua Fishman, a pioneer in this field, especially Stephen Wurm’s 1991 article on language death and disappearance, Salikoko Mufwane’s numerous works on colonization and multilingual environments. For articles dealing specifically with language endangerment in the Taiic language areas, see Matisoff’s 1991 article on endangered languages in mainland Southeast Asia, Sun Hongkai’s 2001 article on endangered languages in China and Sheldon Shaeffer’s 2003 article on language revitalization in Asia. In the present work, we have limited ourselves to a rapid analysis of the Wenshan Zhuang language situation in light of the language use criteria proposed by several recent works seeking to provide clear methods for identifying at risk languages before the point of no-return as far as language attrition is concerned.

3.8.1 Fishman’s “Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale”

Joshua Fishman’s book \textit{Reversing Language Shift} was first published in 1991 and remains a fundamental work in the field of language revitalization. In it Fishman presents an eight-level “Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale” (GIDS) to assess the degree to which the natural transmission of a language from one generation to another has been disrupted. On the GIDS scale, the highest grade indicates the greatest degree of disruption of intergenerational transmission. The higher the grade on the scale, the more likely it is that the language is immediately endangered with extinction. While a high grade does not rule out the advisability of intervention, the language maintenance goals need to be more modest for a language with a higher GIDS grade. For example when only a few older adults can speak the language, documentation and archival efforts may be more realistic than a program to use the language in local commerce or for film dubbing. We will briefly consider the Yunnan Zhuang situation in light of Fishman’s GIDS, not only for the purposes of determining appropriate language development and maintenance efforts for these languages, but also to gain a sense of perspective on their relatively vitality.

The GIDS levels are described in the following stages. “Xish” indicates the language ethnolinguistic community under study; “Xmen” indicates members of that community while “Ymen” indicates members of the majority language community (from Fishman 1991:88–109).

- Stage 8: Most vestigial users of Xish are socially isolated old folks and Xish needs to be re-assembled from their mouths and memories and taught to demographically unconcentrated adults.
- Stage 7: Most users of Xish are a socially integrated and ethnolinguistically active population but they are beyond child-bearing age.
- Stage 6: The attainment of intergenerational informal oralcy and its demographic concentration and institutional reinforcement.
- Stage 5: Xish literacy in home, school and community, but without taking on extra-communal reinforcement of such literacy.
- Stage 4: Xish in lower education that meets the requirements of compulsory education laws.
- Stage 3: Use of Xish in the lower work sphere (outside of the Xish neighborhood/community) involving interaction between Xmen and Ymen.

• Stage 2: Xish in lower governmental services and mass media but not in the higher spheres of either.

• Stage 1: Some use of Xish in higher level educational, occupational, governmental and media efforts (but without the additional safety provided by political independence).

Speakers of Zhuang languages living in some large areas such as Kunming, Kaihua City and the Dai Zhuang villages immediately surrounding Kaihua appear to already be in Stage 7. The older adults, who have already raised their own children, still speak the language fluently and are active in their ethnic community, but younger adults and children are growing up speaking Chinese and with a limited knowledge of the traditional culture.

In other Wenshan Zhuang areas, however, we would describe the situation as Stage 6: the language is being maintained orally across all generations, the speaker population remains concentrated demographically, and some grassroots institutions operate primarily in Zhuang. Fishman describes this stage as a situation in which

Xish [Zhuang] is the normal language of informal, spoken interaction between and within all three generations of the family, with Yish [Chinese] being reserved for matters of greater formality and technicality than those that are common fare of daily family life….Stage 6 is a difficult stage. Some of the families that it contains may not be entirely constituted of Xish speakers or of Xishly fluent speakers. However, the more the Xish speakers are concentrated and the more they reinforce each other, the more they create the social norms and interactive situations that facilitate the acquisition of Xish-as-a-second-language for those who have not hitherto done so, and the more they contribute to the fluency of those who are somewhat less fluent than others….It is precisely because stage 6 is such a crucial stage, the stage of daily, intergenerational, informal oral interaction, that it requires full appreciation and extra-careful attention. The core of this stage is the family (although, given demographic concentration, a community of families can be envisaged). The family is an unexpendable bulwark of RLS [reversing language shift]. The family has a natural boundary that serves as a bulwark against outside pressures, customs and influences. Its association with intimacy and privacy gives it both a psychological and a sociological strength that makes it peculiarly resistant to outside competition and substitution. Although it is true that in modern, urban environments the family has lost much of the socialization power that it once had and much of its ability to close itself off from noxious influences, it is, nevertheless, the most common and inescapable basis of mother tongue transmission, bonding, use and stabilization.

While a well planned and implemented Zhuang language literacy program (level 5) and use as a medium of elementary education (level 4) in the Zhuang-speaking areas of Yunnan would definitely strengthen the language’s position in society and increase the likelihood of its continued vitality in the future, even should these dreams become reality, the family-based oral language transmission that currently is the norm in most Zhuang villages will remain essential for the future of these languages. If the language ceases to be the primary informal language in home domains, Fishman’s research indicates that formal school-based programs will likely fail to keep the language alive.
3.8.2 Landweer’s “Eight Indicators of Linguistic Vitality”

We will next look at the work of SIL linguist Lynn Landweer (2005), who, through her extensive research into many languages of Papua New Guinea, has identified eight “indicators of ethnolinguistic vitality” relevant to language endangerment issues:

1. Relative position on the urban-rural continuum.
2. Domains in which the language is used.
3. Frequency and type of code switching.
5. Distribution of speakers within their own social networks.
6. Social outlook regarding and within the speech community.
7. Language prestige.
8. Access to a stable and acceptable economic base.

Whereas the Bradleys’ criteria focus exclusively on the segment of the population whose use of the language is decreasing, Landweer’s eight indicators look at the wider circumstances which could factor into decreased use of the language on the part of all or some of the speakers. The two systems are not in contradiction with each other, but rather Landweer’s indicators provide us a means for evaluating a given speech community in relative terms to determine the future likelihood of significant decrease in language use. When dealing with a language community whose language is clearly not extinct nor immediately endangered, yet could be threatened with endangerment in the future, Landweer’s indicators provide a useful tool, especially when used diachronically, that is, when the situation of the community is regularly re-evaluated over time.

Though there are significant differences in bilingualism patterns between the Nong Zhuang and the Dai Zhuang language communities, in many other details their sociolinguistic situation is similar. Therefore in the interest of brevity, we will treat the Southern Zhuang languages of Yunnan as a whole in the analysis which follows, keeping in mind the lower percentage of bilinguals among Nong Zhuang speakers than among Dai Zhuang speakers.

Looking at the first of the indicators, “relative position on the urban-rural continuum,” Landweer provides four degrees of urban access:

- Remote, i.e., no easy access to or from the language community relative to the nearest urban center.
- Marginal access to and from the language community relative to the nearest urban center.
- Fairly easy access to and from the language community relative to the nearest urban center.
- Located within urban confines.

Among the one million Yunnan Zhuang all four situations are represented, though the majority of Zhuang speakers fall into the middle of the spectrum, with marginal or fairly easy access to urban centers. Although most Nong Zhuang still live in rural villages, the majority can access urban centers such as market towns, county seats and the prefecture capital; within a day’s bus travel and at a cost of less than Y15 ($2 USD) a village resident can reach one of these towns or cities.

For the next indicator, “domains in which the language is used,” Landweer suggests a sample scale covering varying degrees of restrictedness of domains in which the traditional language is still in use:
• Home, cultural events, social events, and other domains.
• Home, cultural events, social events.
• Home, cultural events where vernacular is used, but is mixed with outside lingua franca or other local language(s).
• Home, where the vernacular is used but is mixed with an outside lingua franca or other local language(s).

Again, there is a variety of situations among Yunnan Zhuang, as just described, but most rural Zhuang use their Zhuang language at least in home, cultural events and social events, and often there is some informal use of Zhuang in other domains such as offices, schools, markets, etc. when all parties present are able to understand Zhuang.

The third indicator, “frequency and type of code switching,” is more difficult to evaluate by means of village research trips of short duration or questionnaires. In evaluating the Yunnan Zhuang for this criteria we must rely more on our overall experience of three years residence among the Zhuang, but with a caveat that we have not done a systematic study of code switching. The scale provided by Landweer is as follows:

• Monolingual allegiance to the vernacular among the majority.
• Evidence of a diglossic or stable bilingualism.
• Infrequent individual unbounded lexical code switching.
• Frequent individual unbounded code switching.

There are relatively few Zhuang who fit the first category, though there are rural Zhuang whose only use of Chinese is to employ rephoneticized Chinese loanwords for items for which no appropriate Zhuang lexemes exist. While there may be movement toward a situation of stable diglossia, at present the degree of Chinese bilingualism and the relative degree of usage among Zhuang speakers is too varied to fit the classic definition of diglossia. Among Zhuang who are comfortably bilingual, we have mostly observed lexical code switching, often apparently triggered by topics for which either adequate vocabulary is lacking in Zhuang or that refer to a domain in which Chinese is the language normally used. In this criteria also, our feeling is that the Yunnan Zhuang fall to the middle of the continuum.

The fourth criteria, “population and group dynamics,” concerns the “critical mass” needed for a language community to continue to employ its language in a living network of social or economically useful relationships. An absolute figure for speaker population is not adequate as quite small populations in remote locations have been shown to be able to maintain their languages, whereas large speaker populations can switch languages en masse should circumstances demand such a thing. Landweer focuses on the immigrants to the language area as a guage of the degree to which outside immigration may be overwhelming the language group. She offers the following four possibilities for immigrants to the language homeland:

• Immigrants are actively bilingual; they speak the vernacular of their adopted home.
• Immigrants are passively bilingual; they understand the vernacular of their adopted home, but use a lingua franca or speak their own mother tongue.
• Immigrants require communication entirely through a lingua franca or trade language.
• Immigrants maintain their own language and insist that others in their adopted home learn to speak it.
In the Yunnan Zhuang homeland, other ethnic groups have resided intermingled with the Zhuang for centuries, and almost all originated from other locations within China, so these are no longer considered outsiders by the Zhuang in most senses of that word. The largest ethnic group in the prefecture is the Chinese-speaking Han, who are considered the prototypical Chinese and hold virtually all the political and economic power within the country, so the Zhuang do not usually view the Chinese as immigrants to their area who need to learn their language, but rather they view themselves as a minority that has to assimilate to the national language and culture. However, given that the Zhuang do appear to be the indigenous peoples of this area of southern China (including western Guangxi Region), if we consider the other ethnic groups, including the Han Chinese, as “immigrants” in Landweer’s criteria, the fourth situation best describes the Zhuang situation with respect to most Han Chinese neighbors, although we have several times encountered Han families living in otherwise purely Zhuang villages who have become either actively or passively bilingual in Zhuang. Some of the other ethnic groups in heavily Zhuang areas, especially the Yao, have become actively or passively bilingual in Zhuang, but most interact with the Zhuang through local Chinese. Though the Zhuang are numerous in population relative to the Wenshan Prefecture population, they are not quite as numerous as the Han Chinese within the prefecture and on a national scale their total population is only about one percent of the national population.

The fifth indicator, “distribution of speakers within their own social network,” employs the jargon of social network theory to examine how tightly the members of the language community are bound to each other in mutually dependent relationships to fulfill their various tangible and intangible needs. Landweer presents four possibilities for minority speech communities:

- Crosscultural independence: intracommunity interdependence with dense, multiplex networks utilizing the local language to meet communication needs.
- Crosscultural interdependence: divided network systems, internally dense and with a degree of multiplexity modified by the necessity to communicate with outsiders who do not know the local language for some goods and services.
- Crosscultural dependence: divided network systems, internally dense, but with the necessity to communicate with outsiders who do not know the local language for all goods and services.
- Individual independence: low density, uniplex networks.

Except for the most remote of Yunnan’s Zhuang, speakers are in some sort of cross culturally dependent networks. Even village Zhuang in heavily Zhuang areas must interact with some non-Zhuang (or members of other Zhuang language groups) who do not speak their language on a frequent basis. At government offices, schools, markets, buses, etc. one is almost certain to encounter at least one Han Chinese or member of another ethnic group. The Zhuang now live in a complicated market economy and while most remain involved in agricultural work, almost all rely upon selling their produce and purchasing items which they cannot produce for themselves. And for a half century the government has actively worked to incorporate the Zhuang into the national political and cultural sphere.

The sixth indicator concerns the “social outlook within and regarding the speech community.” This concerns the degree to which the group maintains a positive self-identity as a group and how the group is viewed by surrounding members of other ethnolinguistic groups:

- Strong internal identity, high status or notoriety conferred by outsiders, with cultural markers present.
- Strong internal identity, neutral status conferred by outsiders, with cultural markers present.
- Weak internal identity, neutral status conferred by outsiders, with some cultural markers present.
• Weak internal identity, negative status conferred by outsiders, with few if any cultural markers present.

In evaluating the Yunnan Zhuang according to Landweer’s criteria, one wishes one had more of an historical perspective on the Yunnan Zhuang. Presently attitudes toward the Zhuang by outsiders are neutral to positive, possibly partially due to government education intended to strengthen national identity over ethnic or regional identities, while at the same time emphasizing the right of ethnic minorities to maintain some level of cultural distinctness. Certainly this was not always the case—ethnic minorities were frequently depicted in a negative way in the past in China, as in most other nations. But at the present, at least within ethnically diverse Yunnan, there appears to be relatively little negative stigma associated with being ethnically Zhuang or speaking Zhuang from the outside, either on the part of the Han majority or other surrounding ethnic groups. In terms of internal identity, though the Zhuang certainly once did have a strong identity—for example, during Nong Zhigao’s uprising in the 11th century—today that identity appears to be weakening due to increased identity as “Chinese” and also modernization. Most village women still wear a distinctive costume, and almost all Zhuang women own a formal Zhuang costume for festival days and weddings, but few men own a traditional costume. Traditional style wooden homes are still being constructed in some areas where felling trees is still allowed, but most Zhuang houses now are identical to the brick houses of surrounding ethnic groups. So from among Landweer’s four choices for this indicator the one that best seems to summarize the Wenshan Zhuang situation is “weak internal identity, neutral status conferred by outsiders, with some cultural markers present.”

Her seventh indicator concerns the prestige the language enjoys relative to other languages available in the area—for example, neighboring languages, related or unrelated, trade languages, national languages, etc. While Landweer’s discussion of this characteristic indicates a focus on language prestige as felt and expressed by the speakers themselves, the scale she provides (below) focuses more on the level of official recognition or lack thereof, which, while possibly related, is not necessarily an accurate gauge of the prestige the language enjoys in the opinion of its own speakers:

• The language in question is a prestigious, nationally recognized lingua franca or the language of church, education, or trade.

• The language in question is a regionally recognized lingua franca, church, education, or trade language.

• The language in question is a locally recognized variety with neutral status.

• The language in question is a locally disparaged variety.

While Wenshan is a Zhuang (and Miao) Autonomous Prefecture, and the Zhuang language has some degree of official status within the prefecture (as in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region), the nationally recognized standard Zhuang variety is a Northern Taiic language spoken in Wuming County, Guangxi. However, the Nong Zhuang language is a de facto standard for Yunnan’s Zhuang people, being used for broadcasting by the prefecture radio station and as the standard for bilingual education pilot testing. The Dai Zhuang and Min Zhuang are not recognized in any way, though they are not disparaged. In terms of the attitudes of the speakers, though the Zhuang languages are not disparaged by speakers themselves or others, for virtually all Zhuang we have met, Chinese is considered much more prestigious than Zhuang, especially the standard Putonghua (Mandarin) dialect, but also the local variety. Other minority languages in the area are not considered more prestigious than Zhuang. It is possible that some speakers of Zhuang languages other than Nong Zhuang consider Nong more prestigious than their own language due to the larger size of its speaker community, but this was not a sentiment we heard expressed. Very few Yunnan Zhuang other than a few intellectuals and government officials have come into contact with the
government-designated standard Zhuang language of Wuming, so this is not considered to be more prestigious than their own language. However, if speakers were aware of the extensive published material in that language (newspapers, textbooks, dictionaries, etc.), it might cause them to view that language as more prestigious than their own.

Landweer’s final indicator is “access to a stable and acceptable economic base.” Phrased in a single word, “money,” this is the indicator that speakers themselves cited the most often as most crucial to linguistic and cultural survival. In China today massive economic changes are taking place and the presence or absence of wealth is causing huge people movements. There is no question in the minds of the Zhuang that mastery of the Chinese language (and maybe some English as well) is vital to their children’s financial success, and as most Zhuang have no retirement provision other than their children’s earnings, the language ability of the children is an issue that lies at the heart of everyone’s personal interests. The Zhuang frequently expressed the point that while they love their culture and language, ultimately the need to make a living must come first—and for those who felt that maintenance of Zhuang meant less economic security, they were clear that the language would have to go. While volumes could be written about the economically-induced changes taking place in Zhuang society, we will refrain from going further into this topic in the present work, except to emphasize that for the Zhuang language to continue to be strong, the Zhuang, like other societies, must come to see the language as not interfering with their children’s ability to fully participate in the national economy. For this indicator, Landweer presents the following four choices:

- Stable and acceptable economic base where the vernacular is the code of choice.
- Adequate dual economy where the language used is dictated by choice of economic base.
- Marginal subsistence economy requiring augmentation of the traditional means of subsistence with non-vernacular, cash-based economic schemes.
- Dependence on an economic system requiring use of a non-vernacular language.

The Yunnan Zhuang are clearly mixed between the latter two, with some rural farmers still able to use primarily their Zhuang language in daily work, only having to use Chinese occasionally on market days or when non-Zhuang buyers visit the village, but with many Zhuang who live in mixed areas, near towns or in towns or cities becoming fully integrated into a Chinese-based multiethnic economic system for their daily needs.

In summary, for most of Landweer’s indicators we see that while the Yunnan Zhuang situation is not the least hopeful for language maintenance, on no indicator did we analyze the Zhuang situation as possessing the factors most likely to result in maintained vitality of the language.

Landweer closes her article by emphasizing that the usefulness of such a scale is a tool to evaluate the relative strength “within the same national context.” Landweer’s original context in formulating these eight indicators was in Papua New Guinea, where the average language group population is considerably smaller than those of the Zhuang language groups: Landweer reports that more than 90% of Papua New Guinea’s indigenous language groups have fewer than 10,000 speakers and that the largest totals are around 165,000 speakers (2005:9, 15). More than half a million people speak the Nong Zhuang language alone. Though this population seems huge compared to the languages Landweer researches, we ought not to conclude from this large population that the Zhuang languages are therefore impervious to rapid language shift, as, within the national context of a population of 1.4 billion, 91% of whom are ethnically Han Chinese, the Zhuang, like the languages of Papua New Guinea, still represent a very small percentage of the national population.
3.8.3 **UNESCO’s Language Vitality Assessment Factors**

Another helpful tool for assessing language vitality has been developed recently by the Ad Hoc Expert Group on Expert Languages of the United Nations Education, Science and Culture Organization. (UNESCO 2003) These factors overlap to some degree with Landweer’s indicators, but they were formulated not just with the small languages of Papua New Guinea in mind but also taking in account the issues involved with language maintenance among immigrant communities, language groups in large industrialized societies, etc. The UNESCO criteria are presented in numbered scales which are assigned scores from 0 to 5, with 5 being most resilient to extinction and 0 usually indicating extinction has already taken place. As with Landweer’s indicators, we have no reason to suppose the various criteria to be of equal significance in predicting the future vitality of the language and therefore we should resist calculating a cumulative index of vitality based on these factors. Six of these factors are considered “major evaluative factors” and access specifically the language’s “vitality and state of endangerment” (UNESCO 2003:7), two factors focus on language attitudes, and the final factor concerns documentation of the language for posterity.

The first factor is entitled “intergenerational language transmission.” The most obvious factor for evaluating the vitality of a language is whether or not it is being transmitted from one generation to the next. (Fishman 1991, 1996) For this factor, “endangerment” is ranked on a continuum from stability to extinction. Even “safe,” however, does not guarantee language vitality, because at any time speakers may cease to pass on their language to the next generation:

- **Safe (5):** The language is spoken by all generations. The intergenerational transmission of the language is uninterrupted.

- **Stable yet threatened (5-):** The language is spoken in most contexts by all generations with unbroken intergenerational transmission, yet multilingualism in the native language and one or more dominant language(s) has usurped certain important communication contexts. Note that such multilingualism alone is not necessarily a threat to languages.

- **Unsafe (4):** Most, but not all, children or families of a particular community speak their parental language as their first language, but this may be restricted to specific social domains (such as the home where children interact with their parents and grandparents).

- **Definitely endangered (3):** The language is no longer being learned as the mother tongue by children in the home. The youngest speakers are thus of the parental generation. At this stage, parents may still speak their language to their children, but their children do not typically respond in the language.

- **Severely endangered (2):** The language is spoken only by grandparents and older generations; while the parent generation may still understand the language, they typically do not speak it to their children, or among themselves.

- **Critically endangered (1):** The youngest speakers are in the great-grandparental generation, and the language is not used for everyday interactions. These older people often remember only part of the language but do not use it on a regular basis, since there are few people left to speak with.

- **Extinct (0):** There is no one who can speak or remember the language.

On this scale the Zhuang situation in most areas is between a 4 and a 5- score, that is, “threatened” bordering on “unsafe,” and in a few areas, such as the Dai Zhuang around Kaibua City and the urban Zhuang in Kunming we would have to say the score is 3 or even 2, that is, “severely endangered.”
David and Maya Bradley, who have done extensive research on a number of languages of southwestern China, also focus primarily on language use and transmission in their definition of sociolinguistic language endangerment (Bradley and Bradley 2002:14):

1. **Potentially Endangered Language:** decreasing use of the language by children.
2. **Endangered Language:** decreasing use by young adults, with very few or no children speakers left.
3. **Seriously Endangered language:** decreasing use by middle-aged adults, with the youngest good speakers about 50 years of age.
4. **Moribund language:** decreasing use by the remaining speakers.
5. **Extinct language:** no speakers left.

Their scale only covers the “endangered” end of the scale, and so healthy, stable, “safe” languages have no place on their scale. In applying their scale to the Zhuang, we confront the difficulty that we have had throughout our evaluation of vitality, that is, which “children” (young adults, middle-aged, etc.) are we talking about here: the remote, rural, agrarian Zhuang children who are most likely to speak the language, the urban children of government employees most likely to speak Chinese as their mother tongue, or some average of the two, including those living near market towns and other language groups? In our discussion of the Zhuang languages’ language use situation we have focused almost exclusively on the rural, agrarian, “heartland” population. Based on that population, we concluded that Zhuang children in almost all locations still speak the Zhuang languages fluently. Had we interviewed well educated, urban Zhuang living in Kunming or Wenshan cities, our results would likely have been quite different: probably we would have found few Zhuang children able to speak the Zhuang language and a number of young adults also possessing only partial ability in Zhuang. Should such urban Zhuang be factored into our analysis of the Zhuang languages’ vitality, or should we remove these ethnic Zhuang from consideration on the basis that these Sinocized residents are no longer fully members of the speech community in question?

Also, the criteria of “decreasing use” is hard to evaluate in the case of the Zhuang who have had contact with Chinese speakers for centuries. Certainly there was once a time in which Zhuang was the only language used in the lives of many of its speakers, but for at least the last century certain domains such as school, government and formal medical care have been conducted primarily in Chinese. Does this represent “decreasing use” on the part of children and adults? Or should we only focus our analysis of the decrease of use on the intimate domains, such as among family members, friends, traditional religious activities, and folk art which seem to belong to the Zhuang languages in the current diglossic situation?

In any case, combining the two scales, we conclude that for the factor of intergenerational language transmission, the language is being successfully transmitted to most children as their first language (even though some may use Chinese more extensively later in their lives) and so while threatened, we would not conclude that the language is technically “endangered” by these descriptions.

The second UNESCO factor concerns the total number of remaining speakers. As we previously mentioned, the importance of population size in considering vitality is relative to the size of the surrounding language groups, and perhaps for this reason, the UNESCO committee does not propose a scale of populations with which to evaluate this factor but rather just emphasizes that “A small speech community is always at risk. A small population is much more vulnerable to decimation (by disease, warfare, or natural disaster, for example) than a larger one. A small language group may also easily merge with a neighboring group, giving up its own language and culture.” Based on the populations of other minority language groups in the Zhuang area, we propose the following scale:
• Very large (5): More than one million speakers.
• Large (4): Between 100,000 and one million speakers.
• Medium (3): Between 10,000 and 100,000 speakers.
• Small (2): Fewer than 10,000 speakers.
• Near Extinction (1): Fewer than 100 speakers
• Extinct (0): No living speakers

The Nong Zhuang thus is considered a “large” language group, whereas Dai Zhuang is a “medium” group for the area, and Min Zhuang is a “small” language group. By contrast, a number of the Guangxi Zhuang languages qualify as “very large” with over one million speakers each, there are several thousand Hmong (Quanqianlian Miao) speakers in Wenshan Prefecture, the Bugan language of Guangnan County is believed to have around 2700 speakers and each of the three Buyang languages in the prefecture have fewer than a thousand speakers yet, but are reportedly still vital with a few intact villages left. Relative to other languages in the area, the Nong and Dai Zhuang languages are not immediately at risk due to an inadequate population of speakers, though this is more of a concern for Min Zhuang.

To complement the second factor, the third factor concerns the proportion of speakers within the total population of the ethnic group. As with certain linguistic minority groups in North America or Europe, a challenge in evaluating the Zhuang for this criteria is the fact that visibly they can blend in very well with the majority population group, the Han Chinese. When Zhuang no longer speak Zhuang or dress in Zhuang clothing, the only means of distinguishing them from the Han Chinese is the official nationality listing on their identity cards, and those of mixed parentage may choose the nationality of the non-Zhuang parent. When speakers of one Zhuang language shift to speaking another Zhuang language, there is no way of knowing due to the fact that ethnic and linguistic differences within the official Zhuang nationality have no longer been officially recorded since the institution of the single Zhuang nationality. For present purposes, we will not consider speaker shifts among Zhuang languages but rather look at the Wenshan Zhuang languages as a whole. As our research took place only within the confines of the prefecture and did not include those Wenshan Zhuang living in cities elsewhere, we will consider the total reference population to be those of Zhuang nationality living in Wenshan Prefecture. The scale provided for this factor is as follows:

• Safe (5): All speak the language.
• Unsafe (4): Nearly all speak the language.
• Definitely endangered (3): A majority speak the language.
• Severely endangered (2): A minority speak the language.
• Critically endangered (1): Very few speak the language.
• Extinct (0): None speak the language.

While the difference between “nearly all” and “a majority” is a judgment call, the Zhuang situation appears to be moving from an “unsafe” situation to that of “definitely endangered,” as the number of Zhuang in Wenshan who cannot speak any Zhuang language is still quite small, percentagewise, but undoubtedly much greater than it was fifty years ago when official nationality designations were assigned.105

105 Of course, we have no means of knowing how many Sinocized Zhuang were assigned Han nationality in the 1950s and vice versa how many people assigned Zhuang nationality descended from Han Chinese who had assimilated into the surrounding Zhuang. And since at least the Song dynasty, Han soldiers and bureaucrats have lived in Zhuang areas and intermarried.
The fourth factor touches on the important sociolinguistic concept of language domains: “where and with whom a language is used and the range of topics speakers can address by using the language” (UNESCO 2003:9). The following ranges of use are proposed:

- **Universal use (5)**: The language of the ethnolinguistic group is actively used in all discourse domains for all purposes.

- **Multilingual parity (4)**: One or more dominant languages, rather than the language of the ethnolinguistic group, is/are the primary language(s) in most official domains: government, public offices, and educational institutions. The language in question, however, may well continue to be integral to a number of public domains, especially in traditional religious institutions or practices, local stores, and places where members of the community socialize. The coexistence of the dominant and non-dominant languages results in speakers using each language for different functions (diglossia), whereby the nondominant language is used in informal and home contexts and the dominant language is used in official and public contexts. Speakers may consider the dominant language to be the language of social and economic opportunity. However, older members of the community may continue to use only their ancestral language. Note that multilingualism, common throughout the world, does not necessarily lead to language loss.

- **Dwindling domains (3)**: The non-dominant language loses ground and, at home, parents begin to use the dominant language in their everyday interactions with their children; children become ‘semi-speakers’ of their own language (‘receptive bilinguals’). Parents and older members of the community tend to be productively bilingual in the dominant and the indigenous language: they understand and speak both. Bilingual children may be found in families where the indigenous language is actively used.

- **Limited or formal domains (2)**: The ancestral language may still be used at community centres, at festivals and at ceremonial occasions where older members of the community have a chance to meet. The limited domain may also include homes where grandparents and other older extended family members reside. Many people can understand the language but cannot speak it.

- **Highly limited domains (1)**: The ancestral language is used in very restricted domains on special occasions, usually by very few individuals: for example, by ritual leaders on ceremonial occasions. Some other individuals may remember at least some of the language (‘rememberers’).

- **Extinct (0)**: The language is not spoken at any place at any time.

In most Zhuang villages, the situation is still best described as one of multilingual parity, though there are some villages near cities or where Zhuang are a small minority where the domains in which Zhuang is used is dwindling (3). The multilingual parity found in most villages may be maintained as stable diglossia. The fact that most of the surrounding Han Chinese people also do not use standard Putonghua (Mandarin) Chinese for intimate domains may encourage the continued use of Zhuang informal domains. As the UNESCO document states: “multilingualism is a fact of life in most areas of the world. Speakers do not have to be monolingual for their language to be vital. It is crucial that the indigenous language serve a meaningful function in culturally important domains” (2003:10).

The fifth factor is one not noted by Landweer: “response to new domains and media.” Compared to indigenous language groups in some smaller, less developed nations, the Zhuang are probably more exposed to new media. Since the 1950s, the government has utilized various forms of media to communicate with all its citizens, including rural, previously isolated minority groups, and today rapid economic development is allowing even the relatively poor access to television, mobile phones, and even computers in China. For the future of the Zhuang language, this is a crucial factor, as the UNESCO article warns:
While some language communities do succeed in expanding their own language into the new domain, most do not. Schools, new work environments, new media, including broadcast media and the Internet, usually serve only to expand the scope and power of dominant languages at the expense of all other languages. Although no existing domains of the endangered language may be lost, the use of the dominant language in the new domain has mesmerizing power, as with television. If the traditional language of a community does not meet the challenges of modernity, it becomes increasingly irrelevant and stigmatized (UNESCO 2003:11).

The following scale is proposed for assessing the community’s use of the language in these new domains:

- **Dynamic (5):** The language is used in all new domains.
- **Robust/active (4):** The language is used in most new domains.
- **Receptive (3):** The language is used in many domains.
- **Coping (2):** The language is used in some new domains.
- **Minimal (1):** The language is used in only a few new domains.
- **Inactive (0):** The language is not used in any new domains.

In the case of the Zhuang there are some hopeful signs. A number of Zhuang have independently started videotaping their traditional epic singing and dancing and producing low cost videos (VCD format) which sell at some local markets. The prefecture radio station broadcasts four times per day in Nong Zhuang, and the Funing County television station broadcasts nightly in Yei Zhuang. However, Chinese and English remain the primary languages used for most broadcast media, computers, text messaging, education, etc. Two major factors that inhibit greater use of Zhuang in these media are the lack of a widely known orthography to use the language in email, text messages, web sites, and educational curriculum, and also a traditional expectation (since the 1950s, that is) that broadcasting, education, and language development are purely the responsibility (and privilege) of the government. Private individuals have not been encouraged to try their hand at home-grown journalism, orthography creation, etc. But the availability of inexpensive video cameras and the increasing accessibility of the internet may change this perception. For the time being, we must conclude that the languages are “coping” with newer media, but with encouragement and a usable orthography the Zhuang languages could become “receptive” to new domains.

Very closely related is the last language vitality factor in UNESCO’s list which deals with materials available for language education and literacy. While not undervaluing the ability of primarily oral societies to preserve their languages, written materials can be a powerful tool in the continued use and development of the language. The scale suggested is:

- **Ideal (5):** There is an established orthography and literacy tradition with fiction and non-fiction and everyday media. The language is used in administration and education.
- **Good (4):** Written materials exist and at the school children are developing literacy in the language. The language is not used in written form in the administration.
- **Fair (3):** Written materials exist and children may be exposed to the written form at school. Literacy is not promoted through print media.
- **Limited (2):** Written materials exist but they may be useful only for some members of the community; for others, they may have a symbolic significance. Literacy education in the language is not a part of the school curriculum.
- **Beginning (1):** A practical orthography is known to the community and some material is being written.
- **Nothing (0):** No orthography is available to the community.

At the moment, most Zhuang we interviewed had never heard of there being an orthography for their languages, other than the modified Chinese square characters (Fangkuai Zi), which very few Zhuang can read at all and traditionally were only used in the religious domain. The nationally approved Zhuang orthography is unknown to most of the Nong and Dai Zhuang speakers we interviewed and cannot be used to write these languages without significant modifications. The Yunnan Provincial Language and Orthographies Commission has recently done some work on modifying this orthography to make it usable by Yunnan’s Zhuang, but very little literacy work has taken place to date, to our knowledge. The only Zhuang we have met who are able to write in Zhuang are professional linguists, anthropologists or radio journalists. Therefore we would have to conclude that for this factor the Zhuang languages of Yunnan are not yet at the level of “beginning.”

In addition to these six language vitality factors, there are two factors concerning language attitudes, the topic treated under the title of “prestige” in Landweer’s article, though here the factor of official attitudes toward the language is separated from that of the speakers themselves. First we look at how government and institutions view and treat the language.

In China different languages are treated differently. At one extreme, Putonghua has been designated as the sole official language of the country and extensively promoted and developed. At the other extreme, many mutually unintelligible languages are still not even considered worthy of the name “dialect” (fangyan, 方言), let alone “language” (yuyan 语言) by government linguists. The constitutional right of all minorities to use their own languages does not guarantee that all minority languages receive equal support or that the same language receives equal support in different provinces or regions. The UNESCO committee proposes the following scale for how languages may be viewed by their governments:

- **Equal support (5):** The language is valued as a local or national asset. The language is protected by law, and the government encourages the maintenance of the language by implementing explicit policies.
- **Differentiated support (4):** The language is explicitly protected by the government, but there are clear differences in the contexts in which the official language and the (protected) language are used. The government encourages the ethnolinguistic group to maintain and use its language, most often in private domains rather than in public domains. Some of the domains of non-dominant language use enjoy high prestige (for example, ceremonial occasions).
- **Passive assimilation (3):** The authorities are indifferent as to whether or not the minority language is spoken, as long as the dominant language is the language of interaction in public space. The non-dominant language does not enjoy high prestige.
- **Active assimilation (2):** The government is encouraging the minority group to abandon their own languages by providing education for the minority group members in the dominant language only. Speaking and/or writing using the non-dominant language is not encouraged.
- **Forced assimilation (1):** The government has an explicit language policy supporting the dominant language while the non-dominant language is neither recognized nor supported.
- **Prohibition (0):** The minority language is prohibited from use in any public domain, though the language may be tolerated in private domains.

Though Wuming County Yongbei Zhuang, a Northern Taic language, is officially recognized by the national government, its status is not equal to that of Putonghua, which is the uncontested national
language, as well as the prestige language and the national *lingua franca*. The Central Taic languages of Yunnan are not officially recognized as being distinctive languages by the provincial or prefecture governments at this point, but both the province and prefecture have been willing to invest a limited amount of resources in the development of Nong Zhuang. While the minority languages are not prohibited, they are not encouraged in schools, government offices, and other institutions where non-Zhuang may be present.\(^{106}\) For the most part, the attitude of the government toward the Zhuang languages of Yunnan is one of passive assimilation.

As far as the community members’ attitudes towards their own language (factor 8) is concerned, it is difficult to summarize the opinions of the many Zhuang we have known and interviewed in anything more than an anecdotal way. In various circumstances, different individuals have expressed varying viewpoints on this issue, and as all social scientists know, what people say to a researcher may not be a true gauge of their attitudes. As we did not conduct a statistically valid sample of the entire Zhuang population, we cannot say for sure what percentage have an interest in maintaining their language, but we would conclude that at present levels of awareness of the issue there is only “mixed” or “minimal” support for language maintenance, according to the following scale:

- **Full support (5):** All members value their language and wish to see it promoted.
- **General support (4):** Most members support language maintenance.
- **Mixed support (3):** Many members support language maintenance; many others are indifferent or may even support language shift.
- **Minority support (2):** Some members support language maintenance; more are indifferent or may even support language shift.
- **Apathy (1):** Only a few members support language maintenance; many are indifferent or support language shift.
- **No support (0):** No one cares if the language is given up; all prefer to use a dominant language.

Many Zhuang are indifferent to the issue because they do not see an irreversible loss of the language and culture as an immediate threat; others feel that the culture is little more than some costumes, dancing and colorful embroidery and can be preserved equally well via Chinese, and a large number feel that while losing the language is regrettable it is a necessary evil for the greater good of their children’s economic futures. As the UNESCO committee writes:

> In many cases, community members abandon their language because they believe they have no alternative, or because they do not have enough knowledge about the long-term consequences of the ‘choices’ they make. People in such a situation have often been presented with an either-or choice (‘either you cling to your mother tongue and identity but don’t get a job’, or ‘you leave your language and have better chances in life’). In fact, maintaining and using both languages will allow even better chances in life (UNESCO 2003:15).

The final factor concerns documentation of the language and is especially for those languages critically close to extinction, such as the Na-Dene language of Eyak [eya] of Alaska, whose last speaker, Marie

\(^{106}\) Officially the policy in almost all Wenshan elementary and middle schools is “Speak Putonghua at school.” This policy, usually posted in large characters at entrance gates of schools, is not intended primarily to be against the use of minority ethnic languages but against the use of “non-standard” local Chinese “dialects.” This policy does not seem to be strictly enforced in many schools, and Zhuang teachers do seem to be free to use the Zhuang languages orally in the early years of elementary school.
At present the documentation situation for the Zhuang languages is “inadequate,” though more has been done in the last decade than ever before and should research into these languages continue, hopefully the next decade will bring the status at least to “fragmentary” if not “good.” At present there is no dictionary or grammar for any of these languages. There are some recordings, both audio and video, of stories and songs, but most are not of professional quality, and many of the audio are on aging magnetic cassette tapes. The present research project has produced annotated digital recorded wordlists and a limited number of short first person narratives, copies of which have been given to both the local speakers who spoke on the recordings and the prefecture Zhuang Studies Association. Much work remains to be done in recording, as well as in archiving in formats that are accessible both to the speakers today and to future members of the language community and the linguistic community (cf. Bird and Simons 2003).

Looking at both the eight indicators Landweer proposes and the UNESCO committee’s nine factors, we see good reason to be concerned about the future of the Zhuang languages of Yunnan. But, on the other hand, at the moment all of these languages are vital to the degree that their future existence is taken for granted by most speakers. Though there are some factors that do not bode well for the continued use of these languages, in most regards the Zhuang situation is at stage in between full health and endangerment.

3.9 Language Use and Vitality Conclusion

While there is no doubt that the Zhuang languages of Yunnan are threatened by the Chinese language in its various forms, as we look at the complex language use situations previously described and compare that with the criteria identified as being significant to the continued vitality of minority languages, in general we conclude that the Southern Zhuang languages of Wenshan Prefecture are not immediately endangered. In terms of the future survival of the Zhuang languages in Yunnan goes, we see that both Nong Zhuang and Dai Zhuang have some hopeful characteristics: relatively large populations, good intergenerational language transmission in most areas, positive language attitudes, and continuing use in various traditional and some newer language domains.
Without focused language development and maintenance efforts supported by the speakers themselves, it is likely that a century from now these languages may no longer be natural, living parts of the lives of this community but may be curious relics of a time few remember. One of the most important tools that the languages currently lack is a practical orthography, a writing system that is not just presented in linguists’ papers, but one that is understood and owned by the speakers themselves. Not only would such an orthography increase the prestige of the languages in the eyes of the speakers, but it would also allow the languages to develop in new domains and keep up with the changes taking place in Zhuang society. Specifically the Zhuang languages need to be used more widely in video and computer media, as these media have replaced books, newspapers and radio as the primary sources of new information in many Zhuang areas, even in some remote villages. Materials for education and literacy must be produced and effectively taught to both children and adults.

In Joshua Fishman’s fascinating article “What Do You Lose When You Lose Your Language?” he describes how he and his wife are passing on their heritage language, Yiddish, to their grandchildren in the midst of multilingual America, dominated by the prestige language of English:

In conclusion I want to tell you something about my grandchildren. My wife engages in laptop publishing. She publishes in the Yiddish language for our grandchildren. But let me tell you, the true lap top here is my lap and her lap and the laps of the children’s mother and father. That is a bond with the language that will stay with them after we are long gone. That is the lap top of language. And if you want that language revived, you have to use your lap also with your children or your grandchildren or somebody else’s children or grandchildren. (Fishman 1996:80)

Like Fishman’s grandchildren, the majority of rural Zhuang children are still learning Zhuang languages on their grandparent’s “lap tops.” Ultimately the future of these languages will be up to those children. Whether they choose to allow their languages to lose traditional linguistic domains to Chinese in one or more of the various dialects, as has happened to some other ethnic groups in the area such as Wenshan’s Mongolians, or whether they will continue to use the Zhuang languages in village and intimate domains and teach in-married non-Zhuang spouses the language and the culture, is up to the Zhuang young people themselves. For the Zhuang languages, and with them the Zhuang cultures, to continue to live as healthy, useful, dynamic organisms depends on what language these toddlers will speak when their own children sit on their laps a few decades from now.

4 Conclusion

The data collected through this survey has allowed us to fulfill our two research objectives:

1. Determine the feasibility of using Nong Zhuang as a reference dialect to meet the language dialect needs of all Wenshan Central Taic (Southern Zhuang) speakers.

2. Understand the village vitality level of the Yunnan Southern Zhuang languages (dialects), the interest of the speakers of Southern Zhuang in Yunnan in Zhuang language development (such as adult literacy, bilingual education and print and non-print media in Zhuang) and viability of further Southern Zhuang language development work.

As far as the first objective is concerned, we discovered that while all ethnically Nong Zhuang people can understand each other's speech at least at a basic level, speakers of Dai Zhuang and Min Zhuang are not able to understand Nong Zhuang even at a basic level. Therefore Nong Zhuang is unable to serve as a reference dialect for the language needs of the Dai Zhuang and Min Zhuang.
Concerning the second objective, all of the Wenshan Central Taic languages appear to be highly vital at the present time, though Dai Zhuang does appear endangered near the Kaihua urban area with younger people growing up unable to speak it. In spite of high bilingualism in Chinese in certain areas, Nong Zhuang is the first language learned by children in most Nong Zhuang villages, rural Dai Zhuang villages, and the small Min Zhuang area in Funing County. Interest among speakers in language development work, such as literacy and Zhuang-language media appears mixed, with most speakers not aware of the possibilities due to their lack of exposure to the standardized Zhuang orthography and prefecture radio broadcasts in Zhuang. However, thanks to a large speaker population, currently stable diglossia, support from the provincial language commission and prefecture minority affairs department and Zhuang studies association, the further Southern Zhuang language development work in Wenshan Prefecture appears to be a viable possibility.

In answer to the primary research question, "Which Wenshan Central Taic (Southern Zhuang) dialect(s) should be the basis for further language development efforts, in order that resources can be most efficiently used to serve the greatest number of those needing resources through the spoken and written forms of their own language?" our conclusion is that development of Nong Zhuang will serve the largest number of those needing mother tongue resources, both due to the fact that its speaker population is around four times that of Dai Zhuang, and also due to its relatively higher vitality levels. Therefore Nong Zhuang should be the priority for Yunnan province based Zhuang language development.107

107 Though Min Zhuang also appears highly vital, the vast majority of the speaker population appears to reside in Guangxi Region's Napo and Jingxi counties. Therefore any Min Zhuang language development efforts are probably best based out of Guangxi rather than Yunnan.
Yunnan Province is located in southwestern China, bordering Southeast Asia.
Wenshan Zhuang and Miao Autonomous Prefecture is located in the southeast corner of Yunnan Province.
Zhuang languages discussed in the present work:

Purple: Dai Zhuang (Wenshan, Yanshan, Mgauna and Malipo counties)
Bright Blue: Nong Zhuang (Wenshan, Yanshan Guangnan, Malipo, Maguan, Xichou and Funing counties)
Brown: Qiubei Yei Zhuang (Qiubei and Shizong Counties)
Violet: Guibian Yei Zhuang (Funing, Xilin, Tianlin, Longlin and Leye counties)
Medium Blue: Min Zhuang (Napo, Funing and Jingxi counties)
Light Blue: Yang Zhuang (Napo, Jingxi and Debao counties)
Wenshan Zhuang and Miao Autonomous Prefecture is composed of eight counties.
Appendix B: Photographs of Yunnan Zhuang Ethnic Costumes

These photos were taken by Zhuang researcher Mr. Wang Mingfu and have previously appeared in Wang and Johnson 2008. They are republished here by permission of Mr. Wang.

B.1 Nong Branch (Pu Nong)

B.1.1 Noangz Zaeu [nɔŋ³³ cʰau²⁴] in Maguan County and Lao Cai, Vietnam

A Nong Zaeu woman at a market day in Malipo County’s Meng Dong Township, wearing the traditional costume for informal occasions.

A Nong Zaeu woman of Maguan County’s Tandi Village (Jiahanqing Township); her silver jewelry is decorated with traditional religious images.
B.1.2 Noangz Daux [ŋɔŋ³³ tau⁵⁵] in Guangnan County

Noangz Daux women at Liancheng Township’s market day in Guangnan County. Their headdresses and silver necklaces preserve traces of the ancient customs of worshiping buffalos and birds.

Noangz Daux women dancing the Zhuang hand towel dance as part of the ceremony to welcome the forest deity at Guangnan County’s Xiao Guangnan Village.
B.1.3 Noangz Nyangj [nɔŋ³³ nʲaŋ²²] in Malipo and Xichou Counties

Nong Qionglin, the hundred-year-old star of Zhuang folk music, who is Noangz Nyangj, in her home Malipo County’s Nanduo Village.

Noangz Nyangj girls gather on the market day at Malipo County’s Babu District, wearing the traditional costume for informal occasions.
A Noang Nyangj lady of Wenshan County’s Xiao Long Village scattering the remains of the dyed rice to chase away evil from her fields.

A young Noang Nyangj woman gathering leaves for wrapping Zongba sticky rice dumplings at Xichou County’s Xin Min Village.
B.1.4 Noang Duh [ŋəŋ³³ tu²¹] in Maguan County

A Noang Duh young woman from Maguan County’s Masa Village wearing the traditional Noang Duh costume and jewelry.

Noang Duh women enjoying the Third Lunar Month Festival in Maguan County.
B.1.5 Nongz Daez[noŋ³³ tai³³] in Zhetu District, Guangnan County

A Nongz Daez woman gathering tea in Guangnan County’s Zhetu District.

A Nongz Daez bohmo (male priest) in Guangnan County’s Zhetu District.
B.2 Sha Branch (Bu Yuei)

B.2.1 

Pu³³i⁵⁵ in Qiubei County

Buz Yix young women transplanting rice in Qiubei County’s Guanzhai Village.

Buz Yix women on a festival day in Qiubei County’s Nahong Village.

Qiubei Buz Yix women inviting one another to come to their festival of the third day of the third lunar month (San Yue San).
B.2.2 Buz Yaez [pu̯³³jai³³] in Funing County

A Buz Yaez young woman gathering feed for hogs in Funing County’s Nale Village.

Dressing up a Buz Yaez girl at Bamei Village in Guangnan County.

Buz Yaiz women wearing their traditional costume in Funing County’s Mapoya Village.
B.3 Tu Branch (Bu Dai)

B.3.1 “Flat Headdress” Tu (Ping Tou Tu, Bu Dai) [ʔbu³³ʔdai²²] in Kaihua and Panzihua Townships of Wenshan County

A “Flat Headress” Tu (Bu Dai) woman wearing her traditional costume at Wenshan County’s Kaihua Township (Wenshan City).

“Flat Headdress” Tu (Bu Dai) participating in an end-of-the-year cultural performance at Wenshan County’s Kaihua Township (Wenshan City).
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“Flat Headdress” Tu (Bu Dai) women wearing costumes embroidered with ancient Zhuang characters at Wenshan County’s Kaihua Township (Wenshan City).

B.3.2 “Piled Headdress” Tu (Da Tou Tu) of northern Wenshan and western Yanshan Counties

“Piled Headdress” Tu (Bu Dai) young women wearing traditional costumes and jewelry in Yanshan County’s Pingyuan Township.

“Piled Headdress” Tu (Bu Dai) women wearing traditional costumes in Yanshan County’s Pingyuan Township.
“Piled Headdress” Tu (Bu Dai) women planting rice shoots in Yanshan County’s Pingyuan Township.

B.3.3 “Pointed Headdress” Tu (Jian Tou Tu) of Maguan and Malipo Counties

“Pointed Headdress” Tu (Bu Dai) woman enjoying the Third Lunar Month Festival in Maguan County’s county seat.

A “Pointed Headdress” Tu (Bu Dai) mother and daughter at Maguan County’s Third Lunar Month Festival.
“Pointed Headdress” Tu (Bu Dai) women spinning cotton at Maguan County’s Majiachong Village.

B.4 The Laji People

B.4.1 The Laji of Maguan County

Laji villagers in Maguan County preparing Laji cuisine.

A Laji woman in Maguan County wearing the traditional Laji costume.
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