

**The 5th International Yi-Burmese Conference:
A description**

Fu Allan and Wu Zhu*
Central Institute of Nationalities
Beijing, China

The Fifth International Yi-Burmese Conference (IYBC) was held August 1-5, 1991, in Xichang, capital of the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, China. It was the *fifth international symposium on Yi-Burmese (= Lolo-Burmese) languages*; the first four had been held in the United States and Sweden. The initiators of this conference were Professor Dai Qingxia (Director, Research Center for Minority Languages, Central Institute of Nationalities), Mr. Tian Xibao (Director, Office of Linguistic Work, National Committee on Minority Affairs), and Mr. Wu Jingzhong (Deputy Director and Research Fellow, Sichuan Research Institute on Minorities). Seventy-six people attended, including 17 from the United States, Japan, Sweden, Norway, and Hong Kong; the rest were from Beijing or the provinces of Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou. Fifty-nine papers were submitted to the conference, but due to lack of time, only 51 of them were presented during the five-day period.

Reflecting the latest level of research in the field, these papers discussed more than ten Yi-Burmese (YB) languages: Achang, Bai,¹ Burmese, Hanl, Lahu, Lisu, Naxi, Nu, Tujia,² Xixia (= Tangut)³, Yi, and Zaiwa (= Atsi). Many of these papers adopted fresh viewpoints and/or new methodology. The following highlights some important aspects of the articles submitted.

1. The largest number of papers fell within the area of **historical linguistics**. There were several papers on the evolution of various types of speech sounds in YB.

Chen Kang ("The origins of voiced prenasalized clusters in Yi") compared several Yi dialects and other languages that still have consonant clusters. He demonstrated that the voiced prenasalized cluster initials in Yi come from (a) Proto-Tibeto-Burman (PTB) prenasalized voiced clusters, e.g.

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¹ Bai is now considered by many Tibeto-Burmanists to belong to a separate subgroup of TB, not to Yi-Burmese. See below. [Ed.]

² It has not yet been demonstrated that Tujia belongs in Yi-Burmese. [Ed.]

³ Many scholars now agree with Sun Hongkai that Xixia is to be included in the Qiangic group of TB. [Ed.]

*Nb; (b) PTB prenasalized voiceless clusters, e.g. *Np; (c) the nasal final of the first syllable of a disyllabic word transferred to the beginning of the next syllable; and (d) the condensation of polysyllabic words.

Zhu Wenxu ("On the evolution of apical consonant clusters in the Yi language, with remarks on some Sino-Tibetan words") analyzed the different development of apical consonant cluster initials in the various Yi dialects. He also suggested that some ancient Chinese words classified by the traditional initial groups (*tòu* 'pass through', *dìng* 'stable', *chuán* 'boat', and *chán* 'meditation') correspond to Yi syllables beginning with [l] and [ɬ], and he has done some phonetic reconstruction in this regard. This may serve as evidence for the relationship between Chinese and Tibeto-Burman languages. Xu Shixuan ("A preliminary study of the affricate initials in Burmese-Yi") and Gai Xingzhi and Jiang Zhuoyi ("The uvulars in Loloish languages") both based their research into the evolution of the speech sounds in question on large amounts of data.

Tonology was one of the "hottest" topics at the conference. It was the consensus of the participants that tones did not emerge until after PTB had split into different branches. The conditions for tonal splitting in individual languages were very complicated. The papers presented at this Conference have further advanced tonological research.

James Mattsiff ("Tonal correspondences in the checked syllables of Proto-Yi, Proto-Burmish, Naxi, and Jingpho: evidence against the 'monogenetic' theory of tonogenesis") suggested that "while there is some correlation between the splits in Yi and Burmish, there are at least eight important differences in the conditioning of the split in the two groups... This seems to indicate that the splitting occurred independently in Yi and Burmish." While Mattsiff's conjecture of YB tonal splitting aroused keen interest, there still exists the problem of accounting for exceptions.

Several Chinese scholars explored the origin and splitting of tones in individual languages. Chen Jiating ("The present situation and origin of Lisu tones") traced the development of Lisu tones by comparing initials and rhymes of Lisu and Tibetan. Fu Ailan ("A study of the tonology of the Nu language") pointed out that Nu tones are divided into two types (lax and tense), which have different origins and development, and put forward the idea of "the multi-layer nature of tonal splitting." Qiu Fuyuan ("Reasons for the emergence of the second high tone in Yi") revealed a case of tone sandhi. The underlying mid-level and low-falling tones surface as the 44 tone in the stream of speech. He suggested that distinguishing grammatical meaning is also an important function of tones.

Xu Xijian ("A study of the disyllabification of nouns in Yi-Burmese languages") proved that monosyllabic YB nouns went through a process of disyllabification, and deduced three means of disyllabifying nouns: affixation, the adding of a content morpheme, and reduplication. Luo Meizhen

("Viewing the relationship between Kam-Tai and Chinese, Tibeto-Burman, and Miao-Yao from the perspective of sound change") compared twenty-odd basic words in these languages and claimed that these language groups share a certain ancient similarity in their phonological structure. The study provided some lexical examples for the common origin of Kam-Tai and Sino-Tibetan.

Turning to grammar, *Dai Qingxia* ("A study of count-noun classifiers in Tibeto-Burman languages") examined the origin of classifiers from the unique approach of studying prosody and syllabic collocation. He proposed that the emergence and development of these classifiers corresponds to the number of syllables in numerals. *Qumu Tiexi* ("On the multiple historical layers of noun classifiers in the Yino dialect of the Yi language") expressed for the first time the theory that classifiers emerged at different points in time and are thus stratified into different groups. *Sun Hongkai* ("A preliminary investigation of interrogative forms in Tibeto-Burman languages") discussed the structure and characteristics of seven types of interrogative forms. He suggested that "special-reference questions" (*tezhi yiwen-jw*) in Chinese and TB have a common origin, and reconstructed some interrogative morphemes.

Huang Bufan ("The endocentric order of the demonstrative and the noun in Tibeto-Burman languages") pointed out the four possible orderings of the demonstrative (DEM) and the nominal head (NH) in TB languages: (a) DEM + NH; (b) NH + DEM; (c) either a or b, but not both; and (4) either a or b or both. She hypothesized that the historical sequence for these four orderings in TB were, from earliest to latest development, (a), (c)/(d), and (b). *Wang Tianzuo* ("The Yi-Burmese substratum of causative verbs and auxiliaries in the Fuqiang vernacular of Mandarin Chinese") stated that the use of the contrast between lax and tense tones to distinguish simplex and causative verbs in the Fuqiang dialect of Gansu Province is a result of YB influence. He offered valuable data for the historical relationship between TB and Chinese.

Genetic affiliation was another important topic in the conference. There were very divergent views on the classification of Bai. In his paper, *He Jiren* ("On the affiliation of the Bai language") arrived at the conclusion that from a genetic viewpoint, Bai is an emerging language within TB, but from the viewpoint of language contact and mixing, it is a language that has not yet fully merged with Chinese. So Bai is neither a "dialect" of Chinese nor a member of the Yi sub-branch. It should then form a branch by itself. This opinion was generally accepted by those present.

Based on a thorough and systematic comparison between Hpun and Burmese, *Tatsuo Nishida* ("On the place of the Hpun language in the Burmish sub-branch") discovered many correspondences between the two

languages and placed Hpun and Ancient Burmese directly under Archaic Burmese.

Inga-Lill Hansson's paper ("A comparison of Ḡḳhy and Akha") was a description of the newly studied language Ḡḳhy. A comparison between this and other Hani varieties suggests that the former belongs to the Hanoid group of languages. *Su Lianke* ("On the stratification of genetic classification and differentiation of race types in Yi-Burmese") avoided the traditional methodology of finding correspondences and cognate words by using the self-appellations of the nationalities and the "interrelation coefficient" of commonly-used vocabulary items to establish the relations among YB languages. While acknowledging the value of self-appellations in determining linguistic affiliation, some scholars commented that to abandon the basic principles of historical linguistics would force us to rely too much on social criteria for the classification of languages.

2. **Descriptive linguistics** has always been the foundation for YB studies. Accordingly, we had quite a number of papers describing various languages, especially the phonology and grammar of individual Yi dialects. Some of these papers are listed below:

<i>Bai Bibo</i>	"On <i>ma</i> ³¹ : The Hani word for no"
<i>Hailai Muga</i>	"The tone sandhi of Yi classifiers and the decimal system of Yi mathematics"
<i>Ji Jiafa</i>	"A preliminary study of the structural morphemes of Yi-Mojiang"
<i>Jiang Zhuyi</i>	"A grammatical comparison between the eastern and western dialects of the Lisu language"
<i>Li Piran</i>	"The structural morphemes of the Hani language"
<i>Li Yongsui</i>	"The Sangkong language: a new reward in Yi-Burmese fieldwork"
<i>Ma Ming</i>	"Peculiar syntactic devices in the Yi language"
<i>Mu Yuzhang</i>	"The formation and usage of Lisu numerals"
<i>Munai Reha</i>	"The Tianba vernacular of the northern Yi dialect: its characteristics and social background"
<i>Tian Desheng</i>	"An analysis of Tujia words for small"
<i>Wiersma, Grace</i>	"Notes on local variation in Jianchuan Bai"
<i>Wu Zili</i>	"Dental-lateral stops in Yi-Nisu: their correspondences in other Yi dialects and related languages"
<i>Wuda</i>	"A preliminary study of the morphology of Yi-Liangshan"
<i>Zhang Tingxian</i>	"Pronouns in the Nasu variety of the Yi language in Lüquan, Yunnan Province"
<i>Zhu Jianxin</i>	"A survey of grammatical categories in the Yi language"

All based on a large amount of data, these papers described in detail the characteristics and functions of the linguistic phenomena being studied. They offered much new material for future research and reference.

3. **Sociolinguistic studies** are still relatively new to the YB field. Significant papers were presented at this Conference concerning the relationships among language, society, history, and geography. *Zhu Chongxian* ("A study of three forms of disguised speech used by Yi people in Wuding") analyzed the forms and characteristics of "round-about speech," "reverse speech," and "secret speech", finding that these argots systematically alter the phonology of general speech, but not its semantics, word-formation, or sentence patterns.

Wang Ersong ("The evolution of the marriage and family forms of the Hani nationality: evidence from kinship terms in three dialects") proved the existence of consanguineous marriages and families in traditional Hani society. *Duan Kuangle* ("A semantic analysis of Hani kinship terms") discussed a set of distinctive features for the semantic field of kinship terminology in Hani.

The Norwegian scholar *Harald Bockman* ("Who names whom: *Naxi* and *Mosuo* between free fantasy and historical evidence") observed that the *Naxi* and the *Mosuo* were one and the same people, and that the two appellations both mean "black people." In attempting to ascertain the meaning of *Ruo Shui* [the *Ruo* Stream]: the ancient name of the *Yalong* River, *Bai Gengsheng* ("On *Ruo Shui*: a toponymical study") discovered that it and other names used by various nationalities of the Yi family all mean "black water": yet another example of the Yi peoples' preference for the color black.

Ding Chunshou ("On the relationship between Yi, Chinese and Burmese: a geographical and historical perspective") based the similarities of Yi, Chinese, and Burmese on their geographical distribution and historical relations. The Japanese linguist *Shiro Yabu* ("Some lexical characteristics of the *Maru-Lashi-Atsi* languages, with special reference to the *Atsi* of Burma") pointed out, among other things, the topographical high/low and psychological near/far criteria for the pair of words *go* and *come*, and some unique expressions for indicating directionality in the languages under consideration.

There were also papers on ancient YB manuscripts and writing systems. *Shi Jinbo* ("Words concerning business and marriage in the Tangut language") discussed the relationship among the words *buy*, *sell*, [*man*] *marry*, and [*woman*] *marry* in some YB languages. That brides were customarily bought in the *Xixia* State is a clue to the social origin of this linguistic phenomenon. *He Zhiwu* ("Two words in Tomba scriptures of the *Naxi* nationality: *tsho*³¹ 'human being,' and *lu*³³ 'herding slave'") traced the etymologies of these two words.

Huang Jianming ("The value of pre-modern Yi writings for linguistics") illustrated the importance of Yi manuscripts and inscriptions by researching the similarities and differences between the Yi language recorded in ancient scriptures and the modern Sanli variety. *Ma Xuellang*, whom illness prevented from attending the Conference personally, submitted a survey of Yi writings inscribed on bronze and stone objects and manuscripts of the Ming Dynasty which have been discovered during the forty-odd years since the establishment of the People's Republic ("Hunting for ancient Yi writings"). *Shen Wufi* and *Wu Jingzhong* ("The relationship between the Yi script and the script used on ceramic artifacts of the Xi'an Banbo dig") remarked that of the fifty ceramic signs, forty-four (or 88%) are the same as Yi characters.

4. **Phonetic experimentation** is the latest development in YB studies. *Jerold Edmondson* and *Li Shaoni*'s "Voice quality and inverse filtering in Jianchuan Bai of Yunnan Province," a collaborative effort between American and Chinese scholars, set up an inventory of phonetic features for Bai: pitch, glottalic stricture (harsh, modal, and breathy voice), tenseness, and nasality. *Kong Jiangping* ("An acoustic study of the tense and lax vowels in Yi-Liangshan") experimented with the five pairs of contrasting tense/lax vowels in the variety of Yi spoken in Liangshan. It was found that the five tense vowels are all lower in height than their lax counterparts, and that to find out the phonation type of tense/lax vowels differing in height, it is more useful to calculate F_1-H_1 , F_2-H_1 , and F_2-F_1 .

The IYBC was an extremely important event in the context of contemporary Chinese research on minority languages. All the major Chinese linguists working on YB languages participated. Scholars of the older generation who were former colleagues and/or classmates, but who were later assigned to different institutions around China were once again reunited. We also saw a new generation of young linguists, many of whom are minorities doing research on their own native languages.

Compared with previous international YB linguistic conferences, the 5th IYBC included discussions of the greatest number of YB languages. Since all the participants stayed in the same building at a guesthouse located just outside Xichang, exciting discussions off the formal schedule were every bit as valuable as the presentations themselves. Many contacts were established between Chinese and overseas scholars and institutions, preparing for more frequent exchanges in the future. A collection of papers from the conference will be published sometime in 1992.

The IYBC was the first international conference on minority languages held in China since the Fifteenth International Conference on Sino-Tibetan Languages and Linguistics (Beijing, 1982). It had the full support of the

National Committee on Minority Affairs from the start. With its help, some overseas linguists could finally visit out-of-the-way places in Yunnan that are normally closed to foreigners. The local administration of Xichang, a Yi area, gave wholehearted support and cooperation. Special sightseeing trips, like visiting a Yi village and joining in the celebrations of the Torch Festival, were well-arranged. The experience that we have gained by organizing the Fifth IYBC will better prepare us for holding future international conferences on Sino-Tibetan or any of the subgroups of Tibeto-Burman.