

The Kam orthography

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1. Kam population and language use

The Kam (侗 , Dòng) nationality is the eleventh largest of the fifty-five minorities in China. Kam people live mainly in twenty counties around the area where Guìzhōu (贵州), Húnán (湖南) and Guǎngxī (广西) provinces meet. A relatively small number live scattered in the Èxī Tǔjiā Miáo (鄂西土家苗) Special Administrative Region of Húběi (湖北) Province.

According to statistics from the fourth national census in 1990, the Kam population is 2,514,014; of whom 1,089,691, or 43%, live in eight counties of Qiándōngnán (黔东南), Guìzhōu: Lípíng (黎平), Tiānzhù (天柱), Cóngjiāng (从江), Róngjiāng (榕江), Jǐnpíng (锦屏), Sānsuì (三穗), Jiànhé (剑河) and Zhènyuǎn (镇远).

Since the Kam people generally live close together, the Kam language has remained for most of them the main means of communication. There are about 800,000 Kam people who no longer speak Kam, and use Chinese instead. They live mainly in Húběi, in the Guìzhōu Tóng rén (铜仁) district, and in Húnán Zhǐjiāng (芷江). The other 1,700,000 Kam people—about 68% of the total population—still speak Kam as their first language. Of these, about one million do not speak any Chinese.

There are many different nationalities living together in the Kam areas. According to the 1990 statistics, some 2,447,000 Miáo (苗), Hàn (汉) Chinese, Bùyī (布依), Shuǐ (水), Yáo (瑶) and Zhuàng (壮) people live in Guìzhōu's Qiándōngnán. In everyday life, each nationality uses its own language, and when the nationalities mix, Chinese becomes the main communication tool. In the counties where the Kam people are most concentrated, it is common for one nationality to speak another's language. I estimate that about 200,000 Hàn people throughout China are proficient in Kam, as well as about 150,000 Miáo people, 50,000 Shuǐ people, 20,000 Yáo people and 10,000 Zhuàng people. Some Kam people are also fluent in Miáo, Yáo and Shuǐ.

2. Kam-language survey and the birth of a Kam orthography

Before 1958, the Kam nationality had no orthography for its language. Some educated Kam used Chinese characters to record the sounds of Kam words. This method of recording Kam is still used in some remote areas.

In 1956, the Chinese Government, in considering the development needs of minority peoples, decided to help those minorities without orthographies to create their own. On 20th March, the State Department published the “Notice concerning the authorisation and division of labour for experimental implementation of new and reformed orthographies for all minority nationality languages.” This in turn unleashed a countrywide movement to develop orthographies for minority nationalities.

In December 1956, the Kam Language section of the Chinese Academy of Science’s First Minority Language Survey Group set off to begin work. It consisted of twenty-eight people, drawn from the Chinese Academy of Science’s Minority Language Research Institute, the Central Institute of Nationalities (in Běijīng, 北京), the Central Southern Institute of Nationalities (in Wǔhàn, 武汉), and the Guìzhōu Institute of Nationalities (in Guìyáng, 贵阳). The members of the Working Group split into three groups, going in separate directions. Between them, they visited nineteen places in fourteen counties in Guìzhōu, Húnán, and Guǎngxī provinces, and carried out intensive language survey. At each place, pronunciation was recorded. In all, this amounted to more than 130,000 words and phrases, more than 8,000 sentences as examples for grammatical analysis, and twenty-five long stories.

In April 1957, the Survey Group, having sorted out and compared the survey data, divided the language into two dialects, southern and northern, with each dialect further subdivided into three sub-dialects. The experts reckoned that as the population using the southern dialect was greater, it was reasonable to choose the southern dialect to be used as foundational in the development of an orthography. The speech of Zhānglǔ (章鲁) village in Róngjiāng was taken as standard. It was from the first sub-dialect of the southern dialect, but had pronunciation and vocabulary similar to the second sub-dialect of the southern dialect. It had nine tones, like the first sub-dialect of the northern dialect. Taking Zhānglǔ speech as standard in creating an orthography was intended to maximise the ease with which both southern and northern Kam people could learn to read and write.

In August 1958, Kam nationality representatives from Guìzhōu, Húnán and Guǎngxī, together with experts who had designed the orthography, convened a meeting in Guìyáng to discuss and agree on “A scheme for a draft Kam orthography.” At the time, the scheme took into consideration the idea of facilitating the study of Chinese pinyin for the Kam people. So Kam was entirely written in Roman script. Sounds in Kam which were the same (or nearly the same) as sounds in

standard Chinese were written with the same letters as for Chinese pīnyīn (拼音). The Kam orthography has thirty-two syllable initials, sixty-four syllable rhymes, and nine tone letters.

On the 31st December 1958, experimental implementation of the draft Kam orthography was authorised by the Central Nationality Affairs Commission.

3. Implementation and use of the orthography

In the forty years since 1958, trial implementation of the Kam orthography has come in four stages: testing from 1959 to 1962, suspension of testing from 1962 to 1980, resumption of general promotion from 1980 to 1987, and a more restricted promotion at certain key points from 1988 to the present day. The work of testing began with the aim of reducing illiteracy in the countryside. Later, bilingual education in primary schools was implemented.

After the orthography was authorised on the 31st December 1958, pilot literacy projects in Kam were immediately launched in Róngjiāng Chējiāng (车江) and Lípíng Máogòng (茅贡). Many people studied enthusiastically. In 1959, the Guìzhōu Nationalities Publishing House published *A Concise Kam Chinese Dictionary* and *A Kam Reading Primer*. These were followed in 1961 by *A Concise Chinese Kam Dictionary* and some more reading materials. This was a good start towards a comprehensive implementation of the orthography. It is a pity that after 1962, for various reasons related to events in China at that time, the work of promoting the orthography was suspended for nearly twenty years.

In 1980, at the request of the Kam people and with the support of the government, the work of teaching the Kam orthography was quickly relaunched. Literacy classes were started up first in Róngjiāng Chēzhài (车寨) and then in Tiānzhù Shuǐdòng (水洞). Each class involved three months of study. In 1982, the literacy program expanded to cover Kam areas throughout the three provinces. The literacy drive reached its peak in 1985, with 249 classes involving 10,028 students. The total number of Kam literacy classes convened between 1982 and 1987 was 1,008, involving 41,368 students. This was the best time for the promotion of the orthography. After 1987, because funds for Kam classes diminished, Kam literacy work dropped off dramatically. Since then an average of twenty classes involving 1,000 students in total have been held per year.

The orthography has been taught at three educational levels. A form of bilingual education has been practised in primary schools, the orthography has been taught as a special subject in vocational schools, and there has been some higher educational teaching.

From 1981 to 1995, the orthography was taught in 608 classes in 135 primary schools. These classes involved 20,892 pupils.

Vocational school teaching of Kam has taken place in two kinds of school. One kind has been Qiándōngnán's special Nationality Cadre schools. Such schools set up nationality language classes in 1984, and between 1984 and 1995, trained 237 Kam students in the orthography. The second kind has been the various county Nationality Teachers' schools in Guìzhōu. From 1986 to 1995, 627 trainee-teachers studied Kam. Most of these became Kam teachers in the primary schools.

The main institutes of higher education where Kam is taught are the Central University of Nationalities in Běijīng (formerly the Central Institute of Nationalities) and the Guìzhōu Institute of Nationalities in Guìyáng. The Central University of Nationalities began having Kam language majors as early as 1953. Then there were fourteen students. The next intake was in 1963, when there were five students. In 1967, there was a class of fourteen students; and in 1985, eleven students. In 1985, the Guìzhōu Institute of Nationalities established a Kam language and literature major in the Nationality Language Department. Since then thirteen classes of Kam students have been recruited from Guìzhōu and Húnán provinces, altogether 157 students. The Nationality Language Department of Guìzhōu Institute of Nationalities has set up an Office dedicated to the work of teaching and research of the Kam language. It is the first Centre for Kam language teaching and research in China.

Kam publications can be divided into two types: teaching materials and other reading materials.

To add to the reading primer and dictionaries mentioned above, a *Kam Language Textbook (volumes 1 and 2)* for use in literacy classes was published in 1981. In addition, between 1986 and 1989, a *Primary School Kam Language Textbook (volumes 1 to 7)* was published in Guìzhōu, Húnán and Guǎngxī, with slightly different versions of Kam text in each province; as many as 200,000 copies were printed. The Guìzhōu Institute of Nationalities has also compiled several teaching texts and distributed these internally, including *Kam Language and Literature*, *Kam Grammar*, and *Kam Dialects*.

From 1959 to 1997, twenty-five other books were published using the Kam orthography, printing altogether 58,750 copies. There were four manuals, twelve literature and art books, three science and technology books, and six social science books. Apart from these, about thirty other books were compiled and printed, though not formally published, by the different provincial and county authorities.

The main newspapers using the Kam orthography have been the *Guìzhōu Nationalities' Newspaper*, Qiándōngnán's own *Miao Kam Newspaper*, and Guǎngxī's *Kam Newspaper*. The main periodicals have been *Kam Periodical* published by the Language Commission in Guǎngxī Sānjiāng (三江) and the "nationality orthography" column in Guìzhōu's *Southern Wind*.

Kam radio broadcasts and television programmes have gone on the air mainly in four counties: Lípíng, Róngjiāng, Tōngdào (通道), and Sānjiāng. In the ten years from 1984 to 1994, 158 films were dubbed into Kam. Of these, 131 were dubbed by Qiándōngnán's Film Corporation and the other 27 were dubbed in Húnán and Guǎngxī.

4. Attitudes of the Kam people to the orthography

There are currently three general attitudes towards the orthography prevalent among the Kam people. One is that it is very useful. A second is that it is practically useless. A third supports the orthography in theory, but not in practice.

Ever since the implementation of literacy and bilingual education classes in the 1980s, the majority of Kam people, particularly those living in areas where Chinese is not widely spoken, have recognised the usefulness of the orthography. Many were eager to study Kam and to send their children to schools where both Kam and Chinese were studied. They reckoned that the orthography was easy to study and remember. After studying Kam for only three months, people can spell, read and write; whereas mastering Chinese takes a minimum of three years.

Many Kam people, however, consider that the orthography is of no use whatsoever. Most of these live near towns or cities and have mastered Chinese speaking and writing. They are unwilling to let their children enter bilingual education schools or classes, believing this would only increase the educational burden on the children.

Other Kam people recognise that it is good in principle to have a Kam orthography and the orthography is relatively easy to learn and remember. In their opinion, however, studying it is tantamount to wasting their time because there are hardly any Kam books or newspapers to read. These people tend to be cadres who are not actually opposed to the orthography, but they reckon that learning it is something to be reserved for those Kam people who do not understand Chinese. Those who *do* understand Chinese have no need to go and study Kam.

I have been teaching Kam at the Guìzhōu Institute of Nationalities for over ten years and various experiences I have had serve to illustrate existing attitudes to the orthography.

Once I ran into some friends from high school days in Kǎilǐ (凯里 , the administrative capital of Qiándōngnán). They are now all either teachers or cadres. They really did not understand my work, asking me why I didn't teach Chinese or English rather than Kam. What use could Kam be? I discussed the case for Kam with them at length, but I could see from the looks on their faces that they were sceptical.

On another occasion, I attended a conference in Guìyáng at which the participants were all Kam. A leader sitting beside me asked me what I taught. I said I was a teacher of Kam language and literature. At first he was quite astonished. Then he asked me what prospects there were in studying Kam. I replied that even foreigners were coming to China to study Kam. He said he found that inconceivable!

There are still many Kam areas where the people do not know there is such a thing as a Kam script. Once, on a visit to my home village in Tiānzhù county, some folk there asked me to write down some Kam to let them have a look. When they noticed how different the Kam script looked from Chinese, they found it very strange. How could you use Kam to write duìlián (对联 , antithetical couplets)? I replied you could use it just as you do Chinese, and wrote down an example for them. When I read the couplet according to standard pronunciation, several of them burst out laughing, shaking their heads and asking where in the Kam world I was from.

In Kam areas where the orthography has been studied, the situation is quite different. As soon as the people in Yándòng (岩洞) village in Lípíng county knew I was a Kam teacher from Guìyáng, they were very pleased. They said they could not find any Kam books in Lípíng to buy and asked me to help them buy some from Guìyáng. When I reported this to the head of the Nationality Commission in Lípíng county, he quickly sent them some Kam books.

5. Current problems in promoting the orthography

In the forty years of its history, promotion of the Kam orthography has enjoyed some success, but the measure of success has not fully met the needs of Kam society. The orthography is currently facing difficulties, and itself has some defects, that need to be resolved.

First, there needs to be another systematic Kam language survey. Although the survey of the 1950s covered a very wide area and the survey team was large, and although the survey was a great achievement, some aspects of it were not ideal. For example, different survey personnel went to different areas; results would have been more consistent if one team had visited *all* the survey points. Some important Kam-

speaking areas were not included in the survey. After the results were in, the speech of the northernmost Zhènyuǎn Bào jīng (镇远报京 and the southernmost Róngshuǐ Zhàihuái (融水寨怀) was combined as the third sub-dialect of the southern dialect. We think this does not reflect the real situation. Intuition and evidence suggest that the speech of Bào jīng should constitute another sub-dialect of the northern dialect. Thus we believe that the whole Kam sub-dialect situation needs to be re-surveyed. New survey information can then be used in helping to define what is meant by “standard Kam.”

Experience of using the present orthography has exposed some points where it is incomplete, points which could do with prompt revision. For example, there is the question of including certain syllable initials which occur in varieties of Kam other than the standard. If these are not included, this will obstruct the promotion of a widely-acceptable standard Kam.

Once when I was on a visit to Huángtǔ (黄土) village in Húnán Tōngdào, some primary school pupils asked me if their Kam script was the same as that of Guìzhōu. If so, why could they not understand some books printed in Guìzhōu? I discovered that they had been trying to read a book of Kam folk songs, compiled and printed in Cóngjiāng county. It turned out that the book contained many errors in representing the tones, because the Kam spoken in Cóngjiāng has only six tones and because the editors of the book were not very skilled in using the Kam script. No wonder people in Húnán could not understand it. This illustrates the need for a good-quality dictionary of “standard Kam.” At present there is none. Each area has ended up publishing according to its own pronunciation and tones. Frequently the limits imposed by the official orthography are not adhered to, especially by people from the northern Kam dialect area. Syllable initials and rhymes are added at will. So people cannot understand one another’s publications. This is extremely detrimental to the promotion of a unified standard orthography. Thus compiling and publishing a dictionary are the biggest and most important tasks that need to be tackled in the current promotion of the orthography.

Finally, the lack of published materials in Kam is one of the biggest factors restricting development. Over the years at least 100,000 people have successfully studied the script, but they have very little to read in Kam except for their textbooks. In recent years, the Guìzhōu Nationalities Publishing House has published a number of Kam books. These books, however, are not money-makers and they have always been published in small quantities, far from meeting society’s needs. In addition, they do not always reach the ordinary people. Money urgently needs to be found from somewhere, to publish and distribute more Kam materials.

