

# Strategies for the Documentation and Revitalization of the Zhuang Language of Southwestern China

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## Abstract

This paper outlines some strategies, methods, and techniques for the documentation and revitalization of Zhuang language and culture through linguistic fieldwork. Zhuang, a Tai-Kadai language spoken mainly in the rural areas of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region of southwestern China, is the largest minority language in mainland China, with mother-tongue speakers numbering about 20 million. While this language is not in danger of dying out in the foreseeable future, it is indeed an endangered language, given that a phenomenon of language shift, as described in Bodomo (2007), is occurring in which more and more Zhuang children, especially those born in the cities, are picking up Putonghua, rather than Zhuang, as their mother tongue or most proficient language. In addition, even though language education policy exists for encouraging Zhuang and the minority language speakers to obtain literacy in their own languages, as Bodomo and Tai (2003) have shown, fewer and fewer Zhuang people are learning how to write their own language, and indeed the official Zhuang script is hardly used in the daily writing practices of Zhuang people. Given such a situation of language shift and lack of literacy practices that is consequently leading to language endangerment, which, in turn, may lead to language death, efforts must be made to document and revitalize the language. Our approach to language documentation in this paper and elsewhere is one of documentation for revitalization as opposed to documentation for mere preservation. This approach to language documentation is an action- and a community-oriented approach (Himmelman 1998) in which we involve members of the community such as farmers, housewives, school children, etc in data collection but also in language revitalization. In terms of methodology, we have evolved what we term *laboratory-to-field experimentation* for collecting and analyzing data.

**Key words:** language documentation, language revitalization, linguistic fieldwork strategies, Zhuang culture, laboratory-to-field experimentation, Chinese minority language research, Zhuang writing system

## **1.0. Introduction**

It is now about 10 years since the publication of Himmelmann's (1998) seminal article (arguing for a differentiation between language documentation and language description), which is regarded by many as signaling the birth of the field of documentary linguistics. While language documentation in various forms and degrees was taking place long before that, the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has witnessed an intensified agenda for language documentation. Many articles and books on language documentation and its attendant cousin of language revitalization have been written (Himmelmann 1998, Gippert, Himmelmann and Mosel 2006, Hinton and Hale 2001, etc) and many academic activities such as conferences, workshops, summer schools, and degree courses have been started up at various institutions of learning. Numerous organizations have also begun setting up funds for language documentation and revitalization (e.g. The Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project at SOAS: <http://www.hrelp.org/> and The Volkswagen Documentation of Endangered Languages project (Volkswagen Stiftung [www.volkswagenstiftung.de](http://www.volkswagenstiftung.de)).

In this vibrant environment, several conceptualizations, methods, and theoretical frameworks (including objectives, criteria, and strategies) for implementing and evaluating language documentation are being discussed. In this paper, based on more than five years of experience with doing fieldwork and language documentation activities on the Zhuang language of Guangxi in southwestern China, we propose some strategies for language documentation and revitalization, which are encapsulated in our theoretical methodological idea of *laboratory-to-field experimentation*.

In section two, we first present the language situation in Guangxi, especially with respect to Zhuang. Section three is an outline of the concept of language documentation, along with our own conceptualization of the term as documentation for revitalization. In section four, we then illustrate this concept of documentation for revitalization and the strategies, methods, and techniques necessary for achieving this through three case studies. Section five is a summary of the ideas discussed in the paper with a conclusion stressing how important it is to develop and refine these strategies, methods, and techniques for a successful documentation and revitalization of China's minority languages.

## **2.0. Language situation and fieldwork**

In this section, we first describe the language situation of Zhuang including its genetic classification and geographical spread before turning to a description of the fieldtrip activities.

### **2.1. The language situation**

Zhuang is a branch of the Kam Tai language group (along with languages such as Thai, Lao, and Dai), which in turn, belongs to the larger Tai-Kadai language family (Edmondson and Solnit 1990, Somsonge and Qin 2006, etc). In 2002 the number of speakers were estimated to be about 16 million (more precisely 16 178 811(PCO 2002)). Qin (2004) estimates Zhuang speakers to be about 20 million. We have mentioned in several parts that Zhuang is spoken in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. Besides here, it is also spoken in the Zhuang-Miao Autonomous Prefecture of Yunnan Province, in the Lianshan Zhuang-Yao Autonomous County of Guangdong Province, in Congjiang County of Guizhou Province, and in Yao Autonomous County of Hunan Province, and, outside China, in northern Vietnam by the Tay and Nung ethnic groups. These varieties are hardly ever mutually intelligible, and indeed the divide between Northern Zhuang and Southern Zhuang is more of an interlingual than an intralingual divide. In terms of literacy, there are two writing systems: a Zhuang character writing system based mainly on Chinese characters and a romanization system, which is supposed to be the official writing system but which is not much used. On the whole Zhuang writing is not very much an everyday practice, eventhough there are some Zhuang magazines like Sam Nyied Sam in Nanning that disseminate information in written Zhuang.

## **2.2. Fieldwork in Guangxi: choices, methods and techniques**

Given that Zhuang-speaking communities are hardly found anywhere outside China, field trips to China and Guangxi, with the aim being to collect authentic and naturalistic data and to understand the cultural context are crucial. I believe that one should always go to the field with an idea of what sort of questions to ask (of course, with an open mind for new questions and issues), so most of our hypotheses and issues were often formulated after preliminary data elicitation from two speakers in Hong Kong (both of whom are PhD students) and from the written documents of Zhuang available in libraries and on the internet. Fieldwork began on the Zhuang language with funding support from grant institutions in Hong Kong and so far the following fieldtrips have been undertaken:

- i. Hong Kong-Nanning City-Debao County-Jingxi County-Tiangyang County (April 2003)
- ii. Hong Kong-Nanning City-Mashan County-Jinchai Town-Dongping Village/Nanning City-Guilin City-Yangshuo County (December 2004)
- iii. Hong Kong-Nanning City-Mashan County-Jinchai Town-Dongping Village/Nanning City-Wuming County-Luoxu Town-Xianshan Village (October 2005)
- iv. Hong Kong-Nanning City-Behai City-Qinzhou City-Changtan Town-Butou Village (August 2006)
- v. Hong Kong-Nanning City- Yiling Yan Cave in Wuming County (December 2007)

A major conundrum in Guangxi is the apparent conflict between economic development and cultural preservation. In general, each time a Zhuang-speaking settlement develops into a modern centre of business and commerce it ceases to be a Zhuang-speaking settlement because more Han-speaking people come into the area and the new town turns into a Mandarin- or Cantonese-speaking town or city!

A careful look at the pattern of fieldtrip itinerary is one of city/town to village. We noticed that, as a result of this conundrum, hardly is Zhuang ever spoken as a public or common language of communication in any city. Indeed, Nanning, the capital city of the Guangxi *Zhuang* Autonomous Region is not a *Zhuang*-speaking settlement; it is mainly a Mandarin-speaking city. In fact, the trend is that children born in the city to Zhuang-speaking parents generally do not pick up Zhuang as their mother-tongue. This important language use phenomenon was the basis of one of our first field trip choices: to do most of the data collection in villages rather than in towns. As mentioned above, communication in these cities is often characterized by a mix of languages (code-switching and code-mixing) such that even when a fluent speaker was found, it was not possible to find actual situations in which only Zhuang would be used over a considerable stretch of time. As a result, most of the recordings we made were done in rural settings by traveling to the villages of our informants.

In terms of methodology and technique, a major choice we had to make was very much related to this issue of language survival. The concern of most Zhuang people, even in the village, is how to document and preserve their language. We noticed that once we were in the village, people mainly got interested in what we were doing when they had some understanding that the work we were doing might lead to the documentation and preservation of their language. As a result of this, in subsequent visits, we decided to develop a technique of dialogue repetition and dramatization in the village based on linguistic texts we had carefully constructed from a proficiency course book (Bodomo and Pan 2007). Very often the villagers would be very amused about the texts and actually dramatize them, say them aloud, discuss them, saying what aspects are authentic Zhuang and what are not, and finally suggesting better ways of making the conversation. Once everybody was satisfied with the texts, we then proceeded to do photo-, audio-, and video- recording the dialogues. In this way we got testimony from the language users themselves that what we were coming up with was indeed authentic linguistic data. Of course, other more spontaneous recordings took place in the form of participating in the everyday lives of the people, especially rites of passage like funerals, birth celebrations, routine farm work situations in which we followed the villagers to the fields and asked them to identify plant, insect and animal names for us, during which we photo-, audio-, and video-recorded them. These semi-controlled dialogue settings along with the spontaneous settings ensured that we collected pronunciation, lexical items and syntactic constructions of authentic Zhuang from fluent speakers without the risk of influences from other linguistic systems through language mixing as we witnessed in the cities. Connecting one's linguistic field research explicitly to issues about language documentation, preservation and revitalization is an important field research technique and strategy in Guangxi, in

particular, and other minority linguistic situations, in general. In the next section we give general characterizations of language documentation and revitalization first before specifying our own conceptualization, a conceptualization that is already evident from the fieldtrip techniques we have described.

### **3.0. Conceptualizing language documentation and revitalization**

In this section, we first present the general view about language documentation in section 3.1 before we present our own in 3.2.

#### **3.1. Background for documentation and revitalization**

Even though issues of documenting, preserving, and revitalizing language and other non-material cultures are not as prominent as issues like preserving and conserving material cultures such as monuments and natural resources, language documentation and revitalization has gradually attracted the attention of not just linguists, but governments and community leaders who consider that some of their languages are endangered.

In China, while not all agree that minority languages like Zhuang, Dong, Miao and Yao are endangered, the government and other concerned people have promoted the documentation and preservation of such minority languages. As reported in Huang Xing (2003), “[A]t present the Chinese government is preparing to carry out a large-scale ‘Protection Project of China’s minority and Folk Culture’, which will involve both the salvage and preservation of material cultural heritages and non-material cultural ones. As the overwhelming majority of nonmaterial cultural heritages are carried and documented through language, the documented and rescued nonmaterial cultural heritage of each and every minority will mainly be their traditional cultural products encoded and recorded in their mother tongues.” (Huang Xing 2003: 5)

Notice that while not directly admitting the term “endangered languages” - and indeed apparently skillfully skirting away from it - the use of terms like “salvage”, “rescue”, “protect” and “preserve” by Huang Xing and many Chinese linguists betrays the fact that many, if not all, Chinese minority languages are indeed endangered and must thus be quickly protected, documented, preserved, and more importantly revitalized. But what is language documentation? Himmelmann (1998), Florey and Himmelmann (forthcoming), and Gippert, Himmelmann and Mosel (2006), among others, have written a lot about the concept and essential features of language documentation. Himmelmann goes as far as to make distinctions between language documentation and language description. For him language documentation activity involves the collection, transcription and translation of primary data while language description involves grammar-dictionary-text collection. He proposes a distinction between documentary linguistics and descriptive linguistics, and seems to deride the idea and conceptualization of language documentation as a subfield of language description as

“language documentation as edited fieldnotes” (Himmelmann 1998: 162)

### **3.2. Documentation for revitalization**

Our approach to language documentation is obviously related to the above conceptualizations especially in terms of the idea of community involvement. But our approach is more radical than the above conceptualization. We see language documentation as language documentation for revitalization, not language documentation for mere preservation. Another difference between our approach and others is that we do not see language documentation and language description as hermitic oppositions but as feeding into each other. What we distinguish between is language description and documentation as against theoretical formalization, even though language description and documentation can feed theoretical formalization with the empirical base that it needs (Mora and Bodomo 2007).

*For us language documentation is a field of research activity in which trained linguists, applied linguists, anthropological linguists and other language scientists use systematic field methods and techniques of community interaction to gather data, develop corpora, and write descriptive and pedagogical grammars, dictionaries and other language learning materials for the purpose of promoting the everyday use of the language by native speakers and foreign learners. The results and products of this language documentation can then form the empirical basis for the development of new theories of language to further our understanding of the nature of human languages. The field of language documentation or documentary linguistics for us thus integrates many insights from linguistic field methodology, descriptive linguistics, applied linguistics, language pedagogy and anthropological linguistics.*

This approach to language documentation/documentary linguistics is thus very tied to language revitalization. It is not just for language preservation. Indeed we believe that the best way to preserve a language is to use it, otherwise it would just become a museum piece and not a tool for everyday communication.

Language revitalization is often used in connection with those languages that are dead or almost dead, and with very few speakers. According to Hinton and Hale, “language revitalization refers to the development of programs that result in re-establishing a language which has ceased being the language of communication in the speech community and bringing it back into full use in all walks of life” (Hinton and Hale 2001: 5). We subscribe to this definition to a large extent but for us language revitalization is a much broader concept that involves not just extinct or almost extinct languages. Most languages need revitalization but the focus is more on those in danger of language shift, such as minority languages and non-official languages. Language shift is a prominent issue that has been discussed in many sociolinguistic analyses (e.g. Veltman 1983, Fishman 1991) and is a concept that involves the process in which speakers of successive generations of speakers gradually lose proficiency in their mother-tongues or the language of their speech community in favour of other

languages. While language shift is not as prevalent in the rural areas it is particularly prevalent among urban Zhuang people and rural-turned-urban Zhuang children. Language shift and language assimilation are themselves important linguistic phenomena that need a more systematic investigation in Guangxi.

Our concept of language documentation for revitalization involves a well-developed methodology we call *laboratory-to-field experimentation*. This is an approach that involves careful preliminary study of the language with a native speaker in tutorial or laboratory setting (cf. Figure 1) and by the use of available resources like published literature.



Figure 1

This enables us to ask questions and develop hypotheses about the language. These hypotheses are then the questions and queries we send to the field. We develop various field methods of linguistic research and techniques of community interaction towards collecting data for documenting and describing the language, and for producing grammars and dictionaries. Our most recent product in doing language documentation as revitalization based on laboratory-to-field experimentation is a proficiency course on Zhuang (Bodomo and Pan 2007) (cf. Figure 2) which, far from just being a manual for learning to speak Zhuang, is indeed a documentation of important aspects of the language and culture of the Zhuang people.

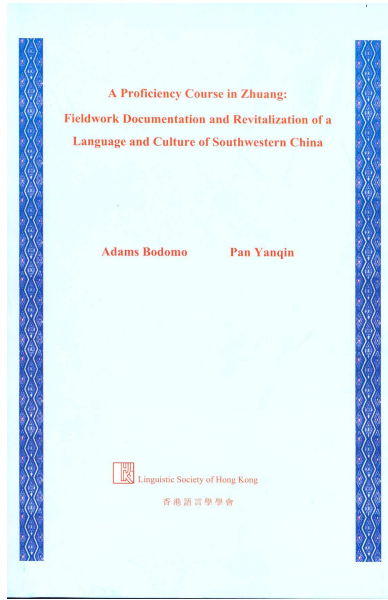


Figure 2

This documentation is not just meant to be a document for preservation but a resource for promoting proficiency in the use of the language and in the understanding of Zhuang culture. One would need some case studies to carefully illustrate some of the features of our conceptualization of language documentation for revitalization.

#### **4.0. Strategies for fieldwork and language documentation: Three**

##### **Case Studies**

To illustrate the principles of documentation that I have outlined which include issues like community involvement, careful *observation and analysis* of language phenomena in use, etc I present three case studies, one from the grammatical system, one from research on kinship relationship and related phenomena, and one from the writing system of the language.

##### ***Case Study I. Investigating verb sequences in serial verb constructions:***

One of the most important goals in our research on Zhuang is to produce a comprehensive grammar of the Zhuang language. Towards that I have already studied different aspects of the grammar, compiling my notes into a draft manuscript of about 200 pages as of now (Bodomo, in preparation). A PhD thesis (Pan Yanhong, in preparation) is also being written.

As a brief illustration I will focus on one of my favourite aspects of the grammar of Zhuang: its intricate set of verbal sequences in what is called serial verb constructions. The Zhuang language has a rich set of syntactic, semantic, and contextual restrictions concerning what verbs can follow each other. It is also very hard to discover the right

order of acceptable and unacceptable verb sequences, and it is always best to research these through language use in context. To do this in my fieldwork, I decided to take advantage of the very restrictive situation of family evening meals in which things were said and done (cf. Figure 3).



Figure 3

One particular example that is very vivid in my mind is the case of picking food with chopsticks to eat, as illustrated in (1) below:

(1a) Mwngez naep byaek gwn.  
 Mwnge22 naep55 byaek55 gwn53  
 2.SG pick food eat  
 “You pick food to eat/You should pick food and eat.”

(1b) ?\*Mwngez naep byaek bae gwn.  
 Mwnge22 naep55 byaek55 bae53 gwn53  
 2.SG pick food go eat

While Zhuang, like many serializing languages, exhibits the object sharing kind of serial verb constructions, as can be seen in (1a) where the two verbs ‘pick’ and ‘eat’ in the SVC share an object ‘food’, Zhuang is different from many languages in that it imposes a lot of semantic and contextual restrictions on what can be added to this basic SVC to expand the event/construction. While the verb ‘go’, as in pick food with chop sticks to eat, is fine in Cantonese as shown in (2),

(2) Ngo5 gaap3 je5 heoi3 sik6.  
 1.SG pick thing go eat  
 ‘I pick food to eat.’

the informants at the family dinner in ‘my’ village rejected this addition as can be seen in the grudging acceptance or outright rejection in (1b) above. In this example, speakers rejected the case in which the verb ‘bae’ is inserted as it is said to be extraneous in the context of the dinner situation. There is however grudging

acceptability if the sentence is to be interpreted as ‘pick the meat with chopsticks and go somewhere away from the table to eat’ (something that is pragmatically weird in the context of a family dinner).

However, in another situation in a different kind of SVC, the benefactive SVC which involves the verb ‘give’ the verb *bae* ‘go’ is all of a sudden required to increase acceptability of the sentence in Mashan Zhuang:

(3) Gou      dawz    bwnj    saw      ndeu    bae      haengj    de.  
       Gou53    daw22    bwn242    saw53    ndeu53    bae53    haeng242    de53  
       1.SG    take      CL    book      one      go        give        3SG  
       ‘I take a book to him.’

(4) \*Gou      dawz    bwnj    saw      ndeu    haengj    de  
       Gou53    daw22    bwn242    saw53    ndeu53    haeng242    de53  
       1.SG    take      CL      book      one      give        3SG

Indeed the absence of *bae* ‘go’ renders the sentence unacceptable in Mashan Zhuang. This is a strong and salient restriction in the typology of verb serialization involving benefactive construction, and deserves more attention.

One way to explain the surprising requirement of the presence of *bae* ‘go’ is captured by the Principle of Exhaustive Phasing (Bodomo 1997), which states:

(5) All salient phases of the group must be exhaustively expressed at grammatical structure. ( Bodomo 1997: 193)

In Mashan Zhuang the idea of directionality as expressed by *bae* is salient and must be expressed.

Note that this requirement is not salient in Qinzhou Zhuang, where the presence and absence of *bae* express a proximity distinction:

(6) Guz      aeu      aen      mag      haeq      mungz.  
       Gu33    aeu44    aen44    mag11    hae11    mung33  
       1.SG    take      CL      fruit      give      2.SG  
       ‘I bring you a fruit.’

(7) Guz      aeu      aen      mag      bae      haeq      mungz.  
       Gu33    aeu44    aen44    mag11    bae      hae11    mung33  
       1.SG    take      CL      fruit      go        give      2.SG  
       ‘I bring you a fruit.’

In (6) both speakers are at the same location or in proximity to each other whereas in (7) the speakers are not at the same location and the agent has to move to the benefactive.

These brief illustrations with object sharing and benefactive serial verb constructions show that intimate participation in community activities is crucial in unearthing and documenting these subtle grammatical points, and thus highlights one of the salient features of our approach to language documentation and revitalization. In the next section I will illustrate my second case study, this time moving from grammar to issues of culture, especially family relations and inheritance.

### ***Case Study II. Family relationship and the concept of hwnjranz***

One of the most striking features of Zhuang culture that I noticed is the concept of *hwnjranz* in which a man leaves his home to live with his wife in her own parents' home. This doesn't sound exceptional until we put this in the context of the Zhuang system of inheritance and their family structure.

As described in Bodomo and Pan (2007), the Zhuang who practice a paternal system of inheritance in which children take their surnames from that of their fathers and adopt their fathers' lineage, also practice an extended family system in which a married son lives with his wife, his children, his parents and their unmarried brothers and sisters. In this system, a married daughter leaves home and lives with her husband's family.

If, however, a family has only daughters, the cultural norm allows the parents to have "one of their daughters to stay home and her husband comes to live with the family." (Bodomo and Pan 2007: 57). It is this practice that is called *hwnjranz*, which may be defined as *a system of marriage in which a husband leaves his parents' home to live with his wife and her own parents in the context of a patrilineal system of inheritance*. In such cases his offspring take on his wife's family surname and inherit their mother's parents.

It was difficult for me to research this in the context of the fieldtrip, as I didn't even think, from an African perspective, that such a system would exist in a patrilineal society until I started observing a young man in 'my' family. Things were further complicated because he was a trader who left the village early to look for pods/silk products to sell to the shops in the market and then returned late in the evening. I thought he was courting one of the young women in the family until I asked and was told that he is actually married to one of the daughters of 'my' family head (who has only daughters) and is living with his wife and her parents. As a slight modification of the living situation, this young man actually built his own house in his wife's village and so, while they live in the village, they don't actually live with their father, his wife's mother having passed away several years ago.

Linguistic terms associated with this practice are varied across the Zhuang dialects spoken in Zhuang communities that practice this.

In Mashan Zhuang, we give the following two examples as illustrations:

- (8) De       bae       hwnjranz       gvah.  
De53   bae53   hwn242ran22   gva31  
3.SG   go       hwnjranz       PERF  
‘He has gone on hwnjranz.’
- (9) Ranz-de           gyonq   meiz   lwgmbwk.  
Ran22-de53       gyon33   mei22   lwg22mbwk55  
family3.SG       all       have   daughter  
‘This family has only daughters.’

In Qinzhou Zhuang, the following two examples illustrate talk around this concept:

- (10) Lanz-dez       zenzen       miz   liq-sau,  
Lan33-de33   zen44zen44   mi33   li11-sau44  
family 3.SG   only           have   daughter  
‘This family has only daughters.’
- (11) aeu       tuz   go-yi   daeuj   hunq-du.  
aeu44   tu33   go44-yi44   daeuj24   hun11-du44  
get   CL   boy       come   hunz-du  
‘That family looks for a boy to do *hunz-du* (as the family only has daughters).’

My discussion with community members and with field assistants indicated that the *hwnjranz* system which was started during Qin Han Dynasty (cf. Huang 1999) serves as an equitable and fair way to ensure the survival and continuity of a family lineage in which there are only daughters in a patrilineal system (e.g., Li 2000, Huang 2000). In the next section, I present my third case study, which involves one of the main themes of this conference.

### ***Case Study III. Investigating patterns of literacy with the Zhuang writing system***

In this third case study illustrating how we documented the use of Zhuang writings (an important theme of this conference) during a field trip, I provide below a quite detailed description of our field report (Bodomo 2003, Bodomo and Tai 2003, Tai 2005).

The Zhuang people have adopted two different writing systems, the character writing system and the romanized writing system. In this third case study, we briefly describe the use of these two writing systems in everyday life, and the use of Zhuang writing in a folksong festival for the ancestor-god *Baeuq Roxdoh* in Tianyang County, Guangxi. These observations were made during a linguistic fieldtrip to the Guangxi Zhuang

Autonomous Region in April 2003, first reported in Bodomo and Tai (2003).

The Zhuang character writing system is similar to the Chinese character writing system in many ways. The history of Zhuang characters can be traced as far back as 682 AD. However, in spite of its long history, Zhuang character writing has never been accorded any official status, and its use in daily life is restricted to folksong scripts, drama scripts, religious scripts, and, occasionally, the recording of geographical names.

During our fieldtrip, the only places where we found Zhuang characters were at a museum and at the Tianyang Folksong Festival. In the Zhuang Museum of Jingxi County, there was a short introduction to the Zhuang characters, and several drama scripts written in Zhuang characters were on display (cf Figure 4). The use of Zhuang characters in the Tianyang Folksong Festival will be discussed later.



Figure 4

In China the romanized alphabetic writing system was first invented by missionaries to assist them in their missionary work, such as Bible translation for a better understanding of their religious message by the natives. In 1955, the Chinese Central Government adopted a romanized scheme as the official writing system of the Zhuang language, and revised the system in 1982. The romanized Zhuang writing system has been used to promote literacy from the 1950s to mid-1960s, and throughout the 1980s.

In present times, romanized Zhuang writing is not difficult to find in Guangxi. Most signposts in the region have to be bilingual in Chinese and romanized Zhuang (cf Figure 5). Apart from public signposts there is a magazine, “*Sam Nyied Sam*” and a weekly newspaper, “*Gvangjih Minzcuz Bau*” published in romanized Zhuang. However, we found that only a very small proportion of the population is literate in romanized Zhuang.



Figure 5

The Tianyang Folksong Festival was held from 8<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup>, April 2003 at Ganzhaung Mountain, Tianyang County. *Baeuq Roxdoh* is the name of the god of all creatures in Zhuang folklore. During the festival it is the usual practice to first walk up to the Ganzhuang Mountain, which is said to be the birthplace of *Baeuq Roxdoh*, to worship the god in several temples. After that some would leave, but most of them would stay at the square near the mountain to sing folksongs overnight (cf Figure 6). On this occasion, the county government sponsored an official ceremony to worship the god *Baeuq Roxdoh* in the square on the second day of the festival.



Figure 6

Interestingly enough, we observed that nearly all signposts at the festival were written in Chinese, including the official banners (cf Figure 7). We could not find any writing in romanized Zhuang on official banners and announcements.



Figure 7

However, on three quasi-religious occasions, we encountered the use of Zhuang characters. The first occasion was the setting of the official worship ceremony. In the shrine for the god *Baeuq Roxdoh* and his wife *Mo Loeggyap*, we could see their names written in Zhuang characters. Apart from that, there were two large banners to the left and right of the shrine, with the two characters 𠵹 (father) and 𠵺 (mother) on them, respectively.

The second occasion of the use of Zhuang characters was when the *bouxmo*, the priest of the rites, recited the religious script. The script was written by the *bouxmo* himself. He told us that he was the most famous *bouxmo* in the county. His father was also a priest of the traditional *Baeuq Roxdoh* belief. He said he started collecting and learning folksongs and religious scripts written in Zhuang characters since his childhood.

The third time we saw the use of Zhuang characters was at a small stall on the square near the Ganzhuang Mountain. This stall sold cassette tapes of Zhuang folksongs, and also the hymns sung during the official worship ceremony (cf Figure 8). The tapes of the hymns often have their lyrics written in Zhuang characters. The stall keeper told us that she was the wife of the *bouxmo* we met earlier, and it was he who recorded the lyrics in Zhuang characters and sold them. We asked the people who bought the tapes of hymns whether or not they can read the lyrics in Zhuang characters. They said they cannot read Zhuang characters themselves but when they listen to the hymns they can easily recognize the characters based on their knowledge of Chinese characters. Most Zhuang characters were written using Chinese characters with similar pronunciation as the Zhuang.



功求神求仙斗求天求地求  
郭皆蘇里使皆蘇可食可食  
许求金可许许求良可机机  
种糖稻可马和菜菜可青肉仙  
身猪猪可马身物物合嘴兰

Figure 8

One of the main issues highlighted from this relatively detailed and first-hand observation is that the use of Zhuang characters is strongly associated with oral culture, including quasi-religious functions, which can hardly be translated into Chinese. There is thus a functional division among the use of Chinese and Zhuang characters. In this bi-literate divide, literacy in the medium of Chinese characters is primary, while literacy through Zhuang characters is secondary and specialized, occurring only when Chinese characters cannot function, such as in recording oral culture.

## 5.0. Summary and Conclusions

The 120 or more minority languages and cultures of China, as of any country, are precious national natural resources. But these precious resources have not always received all the attention they deserve. As a result, some of them are in danger of extinction. We need commitment from government, scholars, and community leaders to document, preserve, revitalize and develop these languages. I am happy to see that efforts are being made to do this by the government and people of China, and this conference on Minority languages and Writing Systems is a concrete example of such commitments and efforts.

But for us to succeed in this task, we need to research new strategies, new methods, and new techniques of doing language documentation and revitalization. Based on five years of doing linguistic fieldwork on the languages of Guangxi, especially Zhuang (but also Dong, Yao and Mulao briefly), I have in this paper outlined some strategies, methods, and techniques of linguistic fieldwork for language description, documentation, and revitalization. These strategies, methods, and techniques include i. a distinct conceptualization of what language documentation is; ii. a clear methodological procedure for fieldwork; iii. close interaction with, and involvement of, the language community including rural dwellers, community leaders, Zhuang language publications, universities and schools in Guangxi, and of course; iv. expert linguistic techniques of data elicitation, collection, and analysis, including careful observation, data transcription and interviews of speakers in actual language use.

The concept of language documentation we have evolved in our work is one of *language documentation for revitalization*. While our conceptualization is similar to general language documentation, it is different and unique in that we emphasize the development of linguistic resources not just as frozen documents for the language museum but as resources for revitalizing the language in terms of learning it, and in terms of promoting a wider use of the language in society. In our conceptualization language description and language pedagogy are both integral aspects of language documentation for revitalization.

We have also developed a methodological procedure for fieldwork that is unique for our purposes which we call *laboratory-to-field experimentation*. As described in this paper, this involves eliciting preliminary linguistic structures from native speaker linguists in controlled laboratory and tutorial sessions and systematically testing and refining these structures among rural speakers using the language in authentic rural settings (e.g. at dinner, in the fields, during afternoon relaxations, during children's play time, and during traditional festivals and rites of passage). This is a method that we continue to refine to suit our fieldwork situation. In future fieldtrips, new strategies and techniques for this new methodology of "fieldwork experiments" would involve eliciting authentic linguistic materials from native speakers through sound, photo, and video clips of activities, actions, situations, and states.

In terms of community involvement, we adopt the general approach by language documentation scholars in terms of seeing language documentation as an *action- and community-oriented approach* (e.g. Himmelmann 1998). Our work is done in close interaction with the community. We do frequent fieldtrips to rural areas and this involves staying with families for week-ends (having meals with them, working with them, going to the market with them, and celebrating festivals with them). In future we hope to spend weeks or even longer periods in the villages. Our involvement also includes visiting schools and encouraging them to study Zhuang, and giving academic lectures at the Colleges and Universities in the area. It also involves active participation with media and print houses and community leaders to make use of their expertise in the production of Zhuang language materials.

In terms of techniques of actual linguistic field investigation, we employ our many years of techniques of data elicitation, data collection, analysis like minimal pair setting, contrasting different kinds of sentences in different settings to elicit rules of syntax, etc. An important feature here is how to develop a strong aptitude for careful observation. Sometimes this involves subtle training of field assistants and graduate students. Rather than explicit teachings, I often involve them in on-the-spot learning, a kind learn-as-you-do or problem-based learning technique. Every situation demands new approaches, especially in sustaining the interest of language consultants and other community members in our project at each time.

We have in this paper illustrated the above strategies, methods and techniques with

three case studies involving eliciting some grammatical nuances about verb sequence in serial verb constructions, the study of a particular system of marriage arrangement termed *hwnjranz*, and, especially, a quite detailed and careful observation of the role of literacy in the Zhuang society based on one social event.

From all these we may conclude that to better document, preserve, and revitalize the minority languages and cultures of China, we need to develop appropriate strategies, methods, and techniques. These strategies, methods, and techniques must suit the local conditions in order to be effective. And they can only be better evolved and refined after a deeper understanding of Zhuang and Chinese society.

The most important concluding message for us, however, is that no amount of theoretical and technical expertise can create success on the linguistic fieldtrip in the absence of techniques of community involvement and, most especially, *building binding relations with local people*.

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