

# Newsletter

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## YUNNAN and her Cultural Treasures.<sup>i</sup>

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It is a happy occasion that Yunnan University has established a Center for the Study of Ethnic Languages and Cultures. I am honored to offer a few congratulatory remarks, on behalf of the City University of Hong Kong,<sup>ii</sup> and the University of California at Berkeley. I hope our universities will continue to collaborate on this important frontier of research on the diverse languages and cultures of East Asia and Southeast Asia.

We are all becoming increasingly aware of the urgency of recording and preserving the languages and cultures of the world, in much the same spirit as preserving the diversity in the world's flora



A Pumi woman admiring the author's little digital camera

and fauna. As an example of this awareness, the Scientific American Magazine of August 2002 features the topic of endangered languages. A Chinese version of this feature will appear in the October 2002 issue of KeXueRen, published in Taipei. Another example of this awareness is that the Lisbet Rausing Charitable Fund has initiated a large program of grants to support the documentation of endangered languages, and has appointed the School of Oriental & African Studies of London University to administer the program.<sup>iii</sup>

Yunnan holds a particularly privileged position for such research. It has fundamental contributions to make not only to China, but to world scholarship at large. Yunnan is located strategically at the base of the Himalayas to carry off the waters from the roof of the world. Her great rivers rush forth to irrigate much of China and Southeast Asia. The Nujiang slices through most of eastern Burma, where it is called the Salween. The Lancangjiang forms a large part of the boundary between Laos and Thailand, where it is called the Mekong. The Yuanjiang turns into Honghe as it crosses north Vietnam to empty into the Bay of Tonkin. And of course, it is the big boulders at Shigu which bend the Jinshajiang eastward to form the mighty Changjiang. It is hard to imagine a China without the waters of her longest river.

For tens of thousands of years, it was these rivers that determined the destinies of the peoples. They carved between the snow capped mountains in northern Yunnan and through the tropical jungles of southern Yunnan, and created the ancient routes along which people travelled and transported their goods. Their waters provided a source of life for people, their animals and crops. These rivers were the major carriers of languages and cultures back and forth throughout south China and Southeast Asia. From their shores, languages of the Tibeto-Burman, Austro-Asiatic, Austronesian, and Miao-Yao families radiated outward to cover large sectors of the world.

The rugged landscape of Yunnan has insulated many of these languages from strong outside influences across the millennia. Even today, some communities can be reached only via steep mountain trails, and some gorges are still crossed one person at a time, sliding across a long cable on a single wheel. These languages often contain relics which help us understand ancient times. For example, the presence of consonant clusters in some Tibeto-Burman languages has facilitated the reconstruction of how Chinese sounded over 3000 years ago. Similarly, words which have largely disappeared from Chinese are still current in some indigenous languages of Yunnan, such as 薪 'xin' for 'wood' or 竹 'zhu'<sup>iv</sup> for 'chopsticks'.

Just as importantly, these more 'pristine' languages offer alternative views of the natural world, views which are becoming increasingly obscured by the hustle and bustle of modern life. It is refreshing to find that 'butterfly' is called 'a flower that flies', or that 'water' may be expressed as 'he who travels while sleeping.' There is an old saying that to learn another language is to acquire another soul. Such words remind us that there are often many different ways of seeing the world, and we must not forget to look.

But the rugged landscape of Yunnan will not protect much longer. Banners can be found everywhere which proclaim that to achieve wealth one must build roads. Everyday, asphalt is being dumped on mountain sides, and trips that now take many days on foot will soon be reduced to hours by car. Villagers are increasingly being lured to the glitter they see outside, and are all too ready to abandon their language and their traditional heritage. Why should their children be urged to learn writing in Lisu or Pumi, when success is much more accessible with Putonghua, or English? And of course, if the children lose the language of the parents, the entire heritage would disappear forever before long. For language provides the soil from which cultures grow.



Tea with Huizu villagers

It is not difficult to empathize with how the villagers think. When a family cannot afford a few hundred renminbi to send the children to school, their need is very real and immediate. Some elders may lament the loss of the ancient ways, but local needs clearly outweigh global principles here. It would be unfair and unrealistic to expect the villagers to compromise their effort at modernizing and self-advancement, and to bear the immense burden of keeping alive their languages and cultures on their own very limited resources alone. The responsibility surely rests with us as well - all of us who believe in the urgency of preserving linguistic and cultural diversity in the world. And for those of us who have a special interest in China, the mission is much clearer still.

There is a Chinese saying: *man cheng hua kai cai shi chun* - it is spring in the city only when all the flowers are in bloom. For Kunming, which prides itself at being the Spring City, preserving her unique abundance of linguistic and cultural flowers is a particularly meaningful task. Yunnan is already well-known for her rich diversity of flora and fauna, and tangible steps have been taken to protect these precious products of biological evolution from extinction. Similarly, Yunnan's rich diversity of languages and cultures are precious products of millennia of cultural evolution, and their extinction is just as final. Certainly they merit just as much care.

So the Center for the Study of Ethnic Languages and Cultures of Yunnan University faces a noble challenge in taking on this task. Since these languages and cultures are disappearing at an alarming rate, a top priority must be to record the most endangered ones as completely and as quickly as possible, using objective audio and visual equipment. Such records will provide invaluable data for generations of researchers in the human sciences. On the more practical side, we must design writing systems for as many languages as we can, so that the folklore, mythology, and various forms of ancient wisdom can be published and made accessible to all interested readerships. These writing systems must be designed with practical goals clearly in mind: that they should each serve the largest community possible, across many

dialectal variations. In anticipation of bilingual education, it is natural that these writing systems should relate well to Hanyu Pinyin.

Surely seeing one's own language written and published in book form will enhance a sense of pride, especially in the context of a Chinese civilization that has always admired the written word. Once writing systems are in place, perhaps it is not too much to hope for that some villages will opt for bilingual education, with little urging from outside. With bilingual education, the life of the local language is assured.

I am perhaps looking too far ahead down a long and difficult road, given that the Center is very much at its infancy. But here I am reminded of the beautiful lines 白居易 *Bai Juyi* wrote:

千里始足下 *qian li shi zu xia*  
高山起微塵 *gao shan qi wei chen*

Indeed, a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step; and mighty mountains are built from specks of dust. Once again, allow me to congratulate Yunnan University in establishing this important Center, and to wish it great success in the noble journey ahead.

(Photographs by Baoya CHEN)

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<sup>iii</sup> Their webpage is at [www.eldp.soas.ac.uk](http://www.eldp.soas.ac.uk).

<sup>iv</sup> The character for 'zhu' continues to be used in Japanese for 'chopsticks', though it has largely disappeared from Chinese dialects. There is a Confucian saying: *li shi er qiu zhu ye* – lost rites may be found in surrounding areas. This saying captures well the anthropological insight about core areas and relic areas in cultural development.