

Chapter 1

Introduction

The Plang inhabit the mountains of Southeast Asia, stretching from Yunnan Province in Southwest China to the mountains in Shan State, Myanmar. They settled in these mountain ranges centuries ago and time and distance have separated groupings ever since. During this time the language has shifted and changed dramatically. Speakers only need to cross a mountaintop to find other Plang who they cannot understand in their native tongue. With most of the speakers of Plang living in poverty or unable to travel outside their home area few have ever encountered researchers. Outside of the countries that they inhabit little is known about them. Where they live, what they speak, and how they communicate is at best a guess at times.¹

In Menghai County in Xishuangbanna Tai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province preliminary surveys (Hopple 2004) have shown that there are at least three major divisions in Plang speakers. The three major distinguishable divisions can be divided up by geographic location; Bulang Mountain District, Daluo/Bada Districts, and Xiding District. However, even inside these divisions there are groups of villages that have trouble communicating in Plang with other Plang villages.

In the Bulang Mountain district there are more than twenty villages known to speak Plang. A dialect perception survey conducted in early 2007 found that there are three major varieties in the district. It is the intent of this study to describe the phonology of the largest variety of Plang in the Bulang Mountain district. The conclusions of this study will help facilitate orthography design and literature development.

After a summary of the origins of the Plang people and a background to the study, with explanation of methodology used in the study, a phonological description of the three varieties will be presented. The descriptions will begin

¹ There is very little that has been published on the origins, culture, and customs of the Plang, the background material presented in this thesis has been collected through personal communications.

with a larger unit of the sound system and will then describe smaller units in succession starting with a discussion on the Plang word, then the syllable, including presyllables, and then the consonants and vowel phonemes. Once these units have been established the suprasegmental features will be discussed. Finally, implications and areas of further research will be addressed. Wordlist that were used in this study will be found in the appendix.

1.1 Plang Origins

The Plang, along with their more dominant relatives, the Wa, are regarded as the aboriginal inhabitants of Southwest China, Northeastern Burma, Central Thailand and parts of Northwestern Laos (Hopple 2004). As the more numerous and stronger Tai peoples, who were moving from Southeastern China down toward present day Thailand and Myanmar, came into Xishuangbanna they forced these people from the valleys to the mountains.

Around 900 years ago when the Tai (Dodd 1923) arrived in Xishuangbanna there was no distinction between the Wa and the Plang peoples. Since the arrival of the Tai the Plang have emerged as a separate ethnolinguistic group, reportedly for religious reasons having turned from animistic practices to Theravada Buddhism (Hopple 2004). This would explain the many Tai loan words, especially the religious and agricultural, in the Plang language.

Most Plang do not know the stories of their origins. When asked if they thought this account was correct they were not willing to accept it or deny it. However, there were a few older villagers who said they had heard stories of their origins that were very similar to this information.

1.2 Geographic Location and Population

Today the Plang live along the China-Myanmar border with the majority living in China's Southwestern Yunnan Province. According to the 2005 census of the People's Republic of China the Plang population within country is approximately 91,900 (2007)². They are most heavily concentrated in the Bulang Shan District of Xishuangbanna Tai Autonomous Prefecture. A small population can also be found in the Lincang Prefecture. When the Plang in Lincang, who refer to themselves as Awa or Ava, come in contact with speakers of the Xishuangbanna Plang, who refer to

² No author. From China Facts and Figures. www.china.org.cn

themselves as Plang or Pang, they cannot understand one another and must use Chinese to communicate.

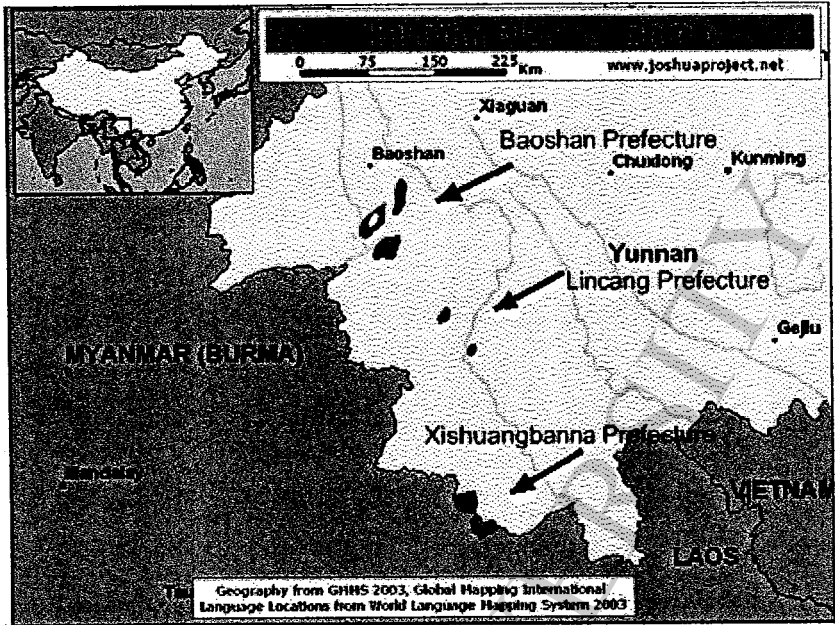


Figure 1 Plang Area in China (From Joshua Project 2009)

Plang can also be found in Myanmar and Thailand. The Plang in Thailand are concentrated in the north around Mae Sai, Chiang Rai Province, with a few living in Bangkok working in gardens and orchid farms. The population of Plang in Thailand is reported to be around 1,200. (Gordon 2005)

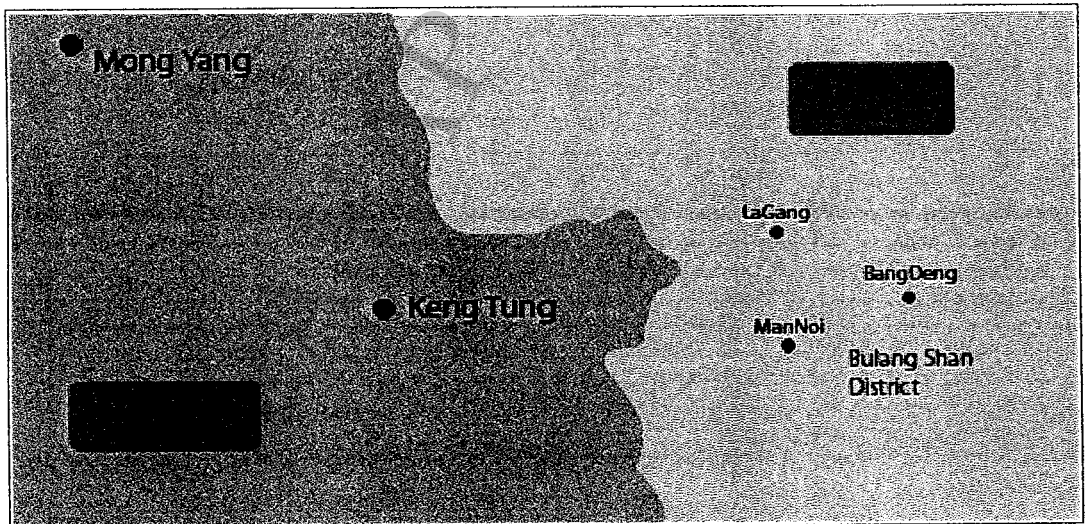


Figure 2 Plang Area (Myanmar and China)

During the time of the Cultural Revolution in China (1966-1976), the Plang people started migrating out of Yunnan. (Paulsen 1992:160) In Myanmar they settled in the Shan State in the city of Keng Tung and in the Mong Yong area, which borders China. The population in Myanmar is reported to be around 12,000. (Block 1994)

1.3 Language Classification

Plang is from the Northern Division of the Mon-Khmer branch of Austro-Asiatic family. Under that division it is then classified under the Western sub-branch of the Palaungic node. In the Western sub-branch Plang falls under the Waic languages. Plang then can be divided into three different dialects based on area, the Bulang Shan, Xiding, and Bada/Daluo dialects.

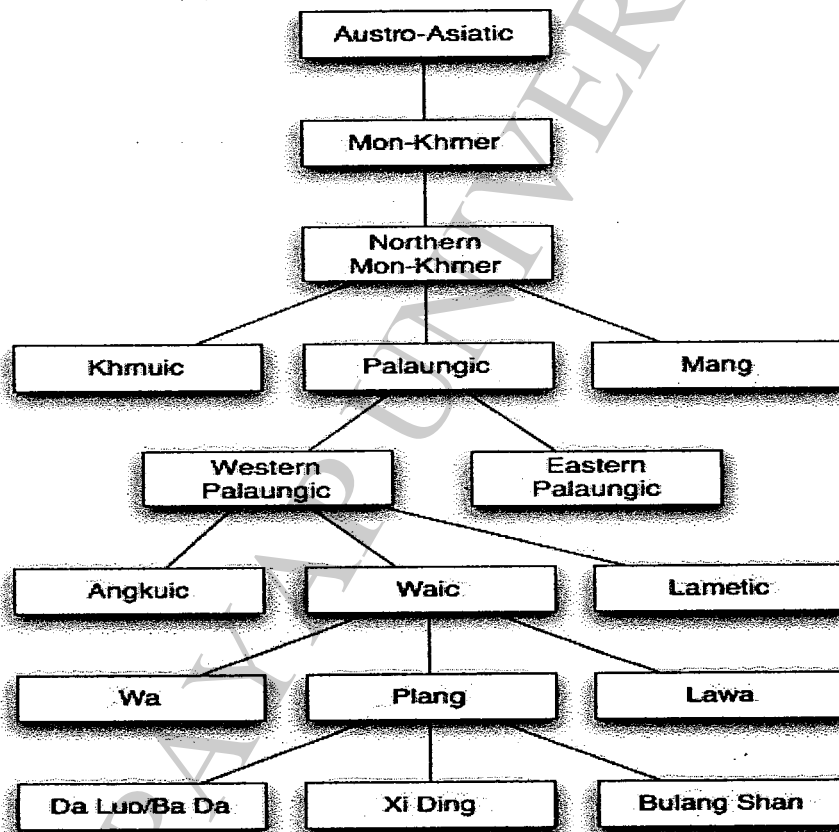


Figure 3 Plang Family Tree (Adapted from Ethnologue 2005)

1.4 Socio-Economic Status and Livelihood

The Plang, especially in the Lincang area, are very poor. The Plang are an agrarian society. Their main crops are tea, rice, corn, and sugar cane. Some, however, have

begun to grow cotton and rubber. Families that do not have enough money to eat have to barter off items they own.

1.5 Education

Since 1949, the literacy rate among the Plang has increased dramatically. Most Plang villages have a school that children can attend through grade 3 or 4 and larger villages may have a middle school. These schools are government funded therefore the medium of instruction as well as all the curriculum is in Mandarin. Despite the increase in number of schools among Plang villages most remain illiterate or semi-literate due to the high cost of schooling. The majority of Plang children do not attend school beyond the elementary level. For children who succeed in advancing to high school they must move from their village to attend a school in the city.

1.6 Religion and General Worldview

The Plang follow a form of folk Buddhism, which is a mixture of Theravada Buddhism, ancestor worship, and the animism that they followed before they converted to Buddhism.

Since the time that they converted to Buddhism much of their ethnic identity is found in their Buddhist faith. Each village will have a temple and each young male is expected to serve as a monk for a short period of time. As a monk they learn to read the Tai scriptures aloud but not to understand what they mean. While villagers of all ages participate in festivals, it appears that only the older villagers are concerned with following the ordinances in the daily life. The most common ideas that villagers know from Buddhism are reincarnation and the giving of offerings. Outside of these two ideas most villagers and monks struggle to explain the ideological foundations of their faith.

The animistic religion they once believed in is seen through their fear of demons, ghost, and spirits. As well as the ideas of gods such as the rock god and tree god are still common in culture. Finally, this animistic religion is most clearly seen through the use of shamanism. Shamans in the Plang culture are women who either have studied how to or are gifted in interpreting the spiritual condition surrounding sickness, crop failure, or any other condition which plagues a person.

The remains of ancestor worship can be seen in their burial customs. When a person dies a chicken is killed to call back the soul of the deceased. The body is then washed, dressed in new clothes, and placed in a coffin. Along with the body, the

family usually places clothes, money and food in the coffin for the next life. The Plang only cremate those who have died unnatural deaths.

1.7 Social Structures and Customs

The Plang are a monogamous, patriarchal society. It is common to find three generations living in one Plang home. When a son marries, he goes to live with his wife's family for two to three years (or until the new bride becomes pregnant). Then, after the appropriate amount of time has passed, the son and his wife will return to his family's home to live. Young Plang are relatively free to choose marriage partners, however, it is not unusual for marriages to be arranged. Some Plang intermarry with people of other minority groups, but most do not.

The Plang traditionally lived in small clans, according to ancestral affiliations. Each clan possessed its own land and each member of the clan was responsible to work and harvest the crops. If a family moved away from the area, they forfeited their right to own land or reap the benefits of the produce. However, in 1949 all Plang forfeited their land rights to the newly founded communist government. The Plang are now allowed to lease land from the government.

Like the Xishuangbanna Tai, the Plang live in stilted homes made of wood. Until recently all homes were made of bamboo with thatched roofs. However, the newer homes are made of hardwood and have tiled roofs. The upstairs of the home is the living area with a "fire-ring" in the middle or to the side. The downstairs is used to pen animals such as pigs, chickens and sometimes water buffalo.

The Plang bury their dead in their own burial grounds, which are divided according to family name (or village). They believe that the deceased with different names (or from different villages) will not get along well and may even get into a fight if they are buried together.

Singing, dancing and playing instruments play a significant role in culture. There are a number of different dances that the Plang have, mostly pertaining to marriage and death. They also have dances for festivals when they are giving offerings of new idols to the temple. These dances are usually to the beat of a drum and cymbals. The main instrument used when singing Plang songs is the four-string guitar. Plang songs are composed of a call and response. The songs are generally about courtship and do not use the every day language. The male will begin and sing about the girl and she will respond to him.