

The Brigands' Song among the Ngạn People in Northern Vietnam

David Holm | ORCID: 000-0001-6658-0245

Professor Emeritus, Department of Ethnology, National Chengchi University,
Taipei, Taiwan
dholm@nccu.edu.tw

Received 15 March 2022 | Revised 17 September 2022 |

Accepted 20 September 2022 | Published online 17 October 2023

Abstract

The Ngạn people are a small local population of Tai-language speakers now living in the eastern districts of Cao Bằng province in northern Vietnam. They are said to be descendants of mercenary soldiers hired by the Mạc royal court during the 17th century. It is the aim of this article to investigate where they came from, using Vietnamese and Chinese ethnological studies, on-site fieldwork and analysis of song texts, supplemented by information from a ritual text and a family register. My conclusion is that the original homeland of the Ngạn was in the Youjiang River valley in west-central Guangxi. Numerous strands of evidence point to a strong connection with the native chieftaincy of Tianzhou and the neighbouring chieftaincy of Si'en.

Keywords

homelands – migration – language corridor – Tai-language speakers – song lyrics – military families

1 Introduction

The present article is the product of two related research projects, both ongoing.¹ The first is to produce annotated editions of traditional manuscripts in Zhuang and related Tai-Kadai languages from Guangxi and nearby provinces in the southern part of China, for publication in our Zhuang Traditional Texts series.² The second project is to consolidate our survey of vernacular Zhuang writing systems, extending it further down to the southwestern part of Guangxi and across the border into Vietnam.³

In Vietnam, the potential scope of our survey includes all of the northern and north-eastern provinces in which Tai speakers and Chinese-style character scripts are found. Basically, this means all the mountainous territory to the north of the Red River valley, though as a result of migration Tai communities and character scripts are also found scattered in various localities well to the south. A key focus here has been to document the languages and vernacular scripts of the Tày and the various Nùng groups. The Tày are mostly residents of very long standing in this region, widely recognised as indigenous, while the Nùng are relatively recent migrants from China, arriving in Vietnam starting in the 16th century.⁴ The Nùng are mostly speakers of Southern Zhuang dialects from the southwestern part of Guangxi or eastern Yunnan and in Vietnam the various sub-groups are often referred to by their places of origin in China.⁵ The dialects they speak are also different from each other, though there is often some degree of mutual intelligibility.⁶ What we have found is that their vernacular scripts are also different from each other and different also from the Tày vernacular script.⁷

1 A similar introduction to the general research background will be found in (Holm 2021, 967–968).

2 The second volume, on the Brigands' Songs of Pingguo 平果 in west-central Guangxi, was published in 2021. See (Holm and Meng 2021).

3 The preliminary results of this survey, including 45 investigation points based on traditional texts from various localities in Guangxi, Guizhou, Yunnan and northern Vietnam, were published in (Holm 2013).

4 The Tày are recognised as indigenous – i.e. descendants of the original human inhabitants in the area – in sources such as (Vương Xuân Tình 2016, 20), which reviews recent research. This judgment is also supported by genetic evidence; see (Li Hui 2002), discussed in (Holm 2018, 235). For the dating of Nùng migrations into Vietnam, see the discussion in (Nguyễn Thị Hải 2018, 53).

5 Lists of these ethnonyms are given in (Holm 2010, 16–18).

6 A comparable mixture of Northern and Southern Zhuang speakers from various homelands is found on the other side of the border. See (Holm 2010, 1–63). A wordlist of several of these local speech varieties is given on pages 41–58.

7 See (Holm 2020b).

One of the provinces in which I have conducted fieldwork in Vietnam is Cao Bằng 高平, a mountainous province almost directly north of Hanoi and just south of the border with China. This is an area which until quite recently had a population with an overwhelming majority of Tai speakers, both Tày and Nùng, but also other groups. One of these other groups was a group called the Ngạn, now officially classified by the Vietnamese government as a 'local sub-group' of the more populous Tày. The classification⁸ itself was evidently anomalous, suggesting that investigation in the field was in order.

The Ngạn were reported to be the descendants of mercenary soldiers who had been hired by the Mạc 莫 royal court, during the time when the Mạc dynasty had its capital and centre of power in Cao Bằng during the 16th and 17th centuries.⁹ Ngạn men were said to be physically strong and good at hunting and the martial arts. Their settlements were distributed along the main roads along which the Mạc royal retinue travelled, from its citadel in present-day Hòa An district through the mountains to the east.

I included the Ngạn in my research plan, along with visits to Nùng An and Tày villages in the same general area.¹⁰ My visits were preliminary visits to selected village communities, with the aim of recording basic vocabularies from a range of different speakers and recording recitations of traditional texts. For the Ngạn, I visited a village community in Phi Hải commune in Quảng Uyên district, some 40 kilometres to the east of the Cao Bằng provincial city. A preliminary visit was made in February 2015, and a follow-up visit in August of the same year, during which I conducted preliminary interviews and recorded a recitation of a ritual text for recalling the lost vital spirits ('souls') of sick people.¹¹

2 The Ngạn People

I will briefly review the main points here of the information about the Ngạn collected by Vietnamese scholars.¹² The Ngạn are said to have been first

8 On official Vietnamese ethnic classification practices see Bế Viết Đăng 1973.

9 The Mạc had their capital in Cao Bằng for a period of almost 80 years, from around 1597 to 1677. See (Tỉnh ủy – Hội đồng Nhân dân 2009, 274–287) (Chapter IV Part III, 'Nhà Mạc ở Cao Bằng').

10 For a description of Nùng An, see (Edmondson 2002).

11 This is discussed in (Holm 2021). Such rituals are comparable with *suu khwan* rituals in Thailand.

12 The authors include local scholars like Triệu Thị Mai, who works on Tày and Nùng traditional ritual performances in Cao Bằng, and ethnologists and linguists such as Ma Văn Hân, Hoàng Văn Ma, and Vương Hùng. Triệu Thị Mai in particular has been active

mentioned in a report printed in 1908 by the French commandant of the 2nd Military District (Cao Bằng), Major Leblond, and were reported to be a brave people renowned for their marksmanship, who lived along the packhorse route between the provincial seat of Cao Bằng and Quảng Uyên to the east (Hoàng Văn Ma 2009, 318).¹³ The Ngạn population was relatively small. In the French Administrative Yearbook for 1939–1940, the population of Cao Bằng was listed as 184,267 people, divided as shown in (1) (Hoàng Văn Ma 2009, 318).¹⁴

(1)	Tày	84,809 people
	Nùng	68,195 people
	Dao [Yao]	11,663 people
	Kinh [Vietnamese]	9,318 people
	Hoa [Han Chinese]	4,516 people
	Ngạn	2,057 people

Ethnologists working in the new Vietnamese government from the 1950's onward proposed that the Ngạn be regarded as a separate ethnicity within what was referred to as the eastern branch of the Tày-Thái (Lã Văn Lô and Đặng Nghiệm Vạn 1968, 150–170 cited in Hoàng Văn Ma 2009, 319),¹⁵ but this proposal did not win universal acceptance and in the 1970s the Ngạn were, instead, classified officially as a local grouping within the Tày ethnicity (Vương Hùng (undated) 12–24 cited in Hoàng Văn Ma 2009, 319). This meant, among other things, that separate population statistics were not subsequently collected, but the people, their language and their social mores and culture did not disappear.

Villages inhabited by the Ngạn are found concentrated in three separate districts (huyện 縣) to the east of Cao Bằng city. Precise information about the location of Ngạn villages was collected in a survey conducted in 1999 by Vương Hùng of the provincial folk art association (Hội Văn nghệ dân gian), who located 5 Ngạn villages in Trà Lĩnh district, 6 villages in Phi Hải commune

in documenting the rituals and songs of the Ngạn; see the References section for a list of relevant works. Hoàng Văn Ma is an eminent ethnologist and linguist who specialises on Tày. Most of these scholars are themselves Tày and Tày-speakers.

13 Hoàng Văn Ma does not mention the title of this report. A typewritten report by Major Leblond dated 13 November 1908 and entitled 'Esquisse historique du territoire de Cao Bang' discusses the Tày and Nùng on the first page, but does not mention the Ngạn. Hoàng may be referring to some other document which I have yet to locate.

14 Nguyễn Thị Hải (2018, 51) cites census data for 1936, which give a figure of 1,756 for the Ngạn population.

15 The eastern branch of the Tày-Thái included the ethnic groups Tày, Nùng, Cao Lan, Giáy [Yay], Pa Dí, Thu Lao, and Ngạn.



FIGURE 1 Cao Bằng province and Southwest Guangxi

and 5 villages in other communes in Quảng Uyên district, and 6 villages in a number of communes in the eastern part of Hòa An district (Vương Hùng (undated) 12–24 cited in Hoàng Văn Ma 2009, 319).¹⁶ The distribution of the relevant communes is shown on the map in Figure 1.

The degree to which Ngan people in these villages were able to preserve their own language and culture was dependent on whether they lived in concentrated groupings or in dispersed communities. As Hoàng Văn Ma (2009, 320) observes,

In the area of Nậm Loát (including the village of Nậm Loát and two linked hamlets Bó Mu and Thua Tổng) – an area in which the Ngan are the most

16 The names of these villages are listed in (Hoàng Văn Ma 2009, 319). Bế Huỳnh also provides a list of the Ngan settlements. His list is slightly different, but still indicates a distribution to the east and northeast of the provincial capital.

concentrated, there are nearly 190 houses close together, and there is no space for people of any other ethnicity to insert themselves. The hamlets in the commune of Phi Hải are all close together in the same way. In areas like this the Ngạn language is still used every day. They only speak the Tày language when they leave their own hamlet or parish (such as when they go to market or go to religious gatherings).

By contrast, he observed, there were also some hamlets inserted amongst the Tày and Nùng populations, where the Ngạn language could be used only very seldom. In these localities, the stratum of the population using the language was often middle-aged people and older. On the general distribution of these settlements, he reported the following information (Hoàng Văn Ma 2009, 320):

The story goes that in olden times the Ngạn people used to live concentrated somewhat to the east of the imperial palace in order to protect the citadel of Nà Lữ (the citadel of the Mạc clan) in Cao Bằng. Seven years before they lost [power] (1669) the Mạc clan moved from Nà Lữ back to Háng Slánh (Phục Hoà).¹⁷ The troops and households of the troops of Ngạn ethnicity moved around, following the movements of the Mạc royal household, and had the duty of assisting on the horse routes between Cao Bằng through places such as Nặm Loát, Phi Hải, and Tị Do... all the way to Háng Slánh. The Ngạn are known for their strength, bravery, and for being expert marksmen, so it was for these reasons that they were trusted and employed by the Mạc royal family. Ngạn soldiers were issued with land by the Mạc and were settled in their own hamlets in districts linked with each other, creating a line of defense and facilitating their mobilisation.

Basically, this means that the Ngạn were employed as imperial guards by the Mạc court and were settled in strategically located villages close to the escape routes used by the Mạc royal entourage and given land to farm when off-duty. In the latter respect they were in some ways similar to the soldier-farmers of the Zhuang chiefly domains in Guangxi, or the military colonists in lands re-conquered by Chinese imperial armies.¹⁸ We note however that this account is based on locally current oral testimony (tục truyền rằng 俗傳說), rather than historical records. The eastern end of this route, Háng Slánh, was a staging post on the way to Longzhou 龍州 in Guangxi, the first port of call across the border in China, a safe haven at the time.

¹⁷ A district in the southeastern part of Cao Bằng.

¹⁸ On soldiers' settlements, see (Holm 2010, 26–27).

3 The Origins of the Ngạn

The earliest and most complete account of the Ngạn is found in the *Cao Bằng tạp chí* 高平雜誌 of Bế Huỳnh 閉荊, dated 1921.¹⁹ In that work, in addition to sections on the Tày, Nùng and other ethnic groups in Cao Bằng, there is a section on the Ngạn, which begins as follows (Bế Huỳnh 1921: vol. 1, pp. 25b–26a; cf. Nguyễn Thị Hải 2018, 50):

The Ngạn people

The Ngạn came from the province of Guizhou in the Northern Kingdom. According to tradition, at the time when the usurper Mạc were occupying Cao Bằng, they took twenty-four native sub-prefectures and gave them to the Qing emperor. As it happened, the Qing Surveillance Commissioner of Guizhou, who was hostile to the Qing, secretly communicated with the usurper Mạc, arranging for the Ngạn people from four sub-prefectures to go to Thăng Long and the Red River crossing and to help the Mạc attack the city wall. This attack was defeated by the Lê [imperial] army. More than half of the Ngạn died in the Red River. The survivors left and came to Cao Bằng, took refuge with the usurper Mạc, and became subjects of the Southern Empire.

諺人

諺人来自北国貴州省。相傳自偽莫窃據高平辰將二十四土州献與清皇。適清貴州省按察使與清搆衅、通同偽莫、卒四州諺人抵昇竜河渡、以扶莫為名、攻打城池。為黎軍所敗、死於珥河太半。其餘走來高平、依偽莫投為南民。

This account then goes on to list the locations in which the Ngạn were settled and to comment on the degree to which they assimilated with the Tày in everyday life.²⁰ Hoàng Văn Ma's inference was that the reference to the

19 On Bế Huỳnh, Nguyễn Thị Hải's MA thesis gives the following information: Bế Huỳnh (1857–1930), was a native of Tĩnh Oa commune in Thạch Lâm (present-day Dân Chủ commune, Hòa An district, Cao Bằng). He served as local official in various parts of the province, both in Trùng Khánh and later in Hà Quảng. He took a keen interest in local history. See (Nguyễn Thị Hải 2009, 4).

20 A very similar account, based closely on that of Bế Huỳnh, is found in a draft history of Cao Bằng province compiled by the provincial Cultural Department in the 1960's: (Ty văn hóa Cao Bằng 1963, 46–47), quoted in (Hoàng Văn Ma 2009, 320–1).

Surveillance Commissioner (*anchashi* 安察使) of Guizhou was a reference to Wu Sangui 吳三桂, one of the Three Feudatories (Sanfan 三番), powerful marcher lords during the Ming-Qing transition period, powerful that is until vanquished by the Qing (Hoàng Văn Ma 2009, 321).²¹

There are a number of problems lurking in this account, quite apart from the statement that the Ngạn came from Guizhou.²² One of these is the date of the Mạc army's attack on the capital Thăng Long, which does not match up with a Qing dynasty date. The Mạc by that stage were too weak militarily to have undertaken such a venture. The most likely date for this attack is in fact 1623, as suggested in Nguyễn Thị Hải's (2018, 50) account. This campaign is described in the *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* 大越史記全書, with circumstantial details which fit very closely with Bế Huỳnh's account, including the reference to heavy casualties (Ngô Sĩ Liên 1986, 936–937).²³ This date is also in agreement with the account in the Cao Bằng provincial history (Tỉnh Ủy – Hội đồng Nhân dân 2009, 288–89). Bế Huỳnh's account does not actually mention the name of the Guizhou official who communicated with the Mạc and this question must be left for future investigation.

While the account of Bế Huỳnh makes it clear that the arrival of the Ngạn was connected with the operations of the Mạc in Cao Bằng, Hoàng Văn Ma adduces other evidence that suggests that the Ngạn presence in the area may have started some time before the Mạc arrived in the north. Some of this evidence has to do with the dates of traditional festivals, the Ngạn calendar, and other aspects of traditional Ngạn culture found in Ngạn villages (Hoàng Văn Ma 2009, 322–325). This is circumstantial evidence and in itself does not provide any clear answers about where the Ngạn came from or when the first contingents arrived. On the other hand, given what else we know about

21 On Wu Sangui, who was appointed governor of the provinces of Guizhou and Yunnan (Pingxi wang 平西王) in 1655, see (Goodrich 1976, 877–880). A Surveillance Commissioner was the overseer of judicial and surveillance activities in the province. See (Hucker 1985, 102).

22 (Nguyễn Thị Hải 2018, 50) comments that it had not been possible to verify Bế Huỳnh's account of the Ngạn.

23 This account does not specifically mention the Ngạn. For that matter, Đinh Khắc Thuân of the Hán-Nôm Institute, an eminent authority on the Mạc, comments that he has never written about the Ngạn; and Chu Xuân Giao, who also conducts ethnological research on the Mạc in Cao Bằng, reports that the Ngạn do not appear in regular historical sources and that accounts connecting them with the Mạc court are simply 'oral history' (Đinh and Chu, personal communication, September 2022).

native troops serving in the Chinese imperial armies, an earlier date is not implausible.²⁴

4 On the Ethnonym Ngạn

On the ethnonym itself, Hoàng Văn Ma noted that the Chinese character used to refer to the 'Ngạn people' (Ngạn nhân) meant 'bank of a river', and that the common understanding in the area was that the name referred to "people who live on the banks of rivers" (Hoàng Văn Ma 2009, 322). This interpretation is evidently based on one of the ways the name is written in Chinese, as 岸人 *ànrén*, where 岸 *àn* usually means 'bank, embankment, cliff'. Bế Huỳnh's rendering of the name was 諺人 *yànrén*, where 諺 *yàn* 'proverb' was simply a phonetic rendering of the name.²⁵

5 The Ngạn Language

In the same article, Hoàng Văn Ma also discussed the affiliation of the Ngạn language. He began his discussion by observing that, even though the Ngạn were officially categorised as a local branch of the Tày, there was no one who would say that the Ngạn language was a local dialect of the Tày language (Hoàng Văn Ma 2009, 323). Vương Hùng's estimate was that while the Ngạn language shared 40% of its common vocabulary with Tày, there was 60% that was different. People in the region who had travelled around and had wider social connections would often comment that the Ngạn language was closer to the Giáy language, or to the language of the Nùng An (Hoàng Văn Ma 2009, 326).²⁶

Hoàng Văn Ma then went on to conduct a test comparison between Ngạn, Giáy, Nùng An and Tày, using the standard 100 basic vocabulary words of Morris Swadesh as a basis. He produced two sets of figures, one (the A series) for words which were cognate in the two languages compared, and the other (the B series) for words which were exactly the same. He observed as a matter of

24 Regular imperial troops in the Ming dynasty's invasion and occupation of Vietnam during the Yongle period (1403–1424) were accompanied by 34,000 native troops from Zhuang native chieftaincies: see (Zheng Yongchang 1998, 37).

25 (Pulleyblank 1991, 359) gives Middle Chinese readings EMC *ɲian^h* and LMC *ɲian'* for 諺 *yàn*. For 岸 *àn* 'bank, shore' he gives EMC *ɲian^h* and LMC *ɲan'* (p. 24).

26 The Giáy in Vietnam are an ethnic group related to the Bouyei in Guizhou. They are also referred to as the Yáy in international scholarship. See e.g. (Hudak 1991). They are speakers

everyday interactions, people were not able to understand the speech of others if the cognate words were too different from each other in pronunciation. Thus, the word for ‘house’ in Tày was *shuòn*, but *ràn* in Nùng An and *làn* in Ngạn (Hoàng Văn Ma 2009, 326–327). The result of his comparison, shown in (2) below, was:

(2)	Ngạn with Giáy	A 96%	B 70%
	Ngạn with Nùng An	A 87%	B 48%
	Ngạn with Tày	A 80%	B 33%

He concluded, among other things, that the degree of commonality between Ngạn and Giáy was indeed the highest and that the commonality with Nùng An was also much greater than with Tày. The low percentage of recognisably common vocabulary between Ngạn and Tày indeed made it very difficult for speakers of these two languages to communicate in their mother tongues.

The explanation for the high correlation between Ngạn and Giáy is simple and straightforward: both of these are Northern Tai languages and in China there is a continuum between Bouyei 布依 (Yay) and the northern dialects of Zhuang. Tày by comparison is a Central Tai language, corresponding more closely to the Southern Zhuang dialects in the southwestern part of Guangxi.²⁷

Hoàng Văn Ma did not cite any linguistic evidence from north of the border, where there have been dialect surveys for both Zhuang and Bouyei. His discussion is useful in its own right but his determination of the affiliation of the Ngạn language could not be anything other than inconclusive.

6 Ngạn Traditional Song

Valuable information about the Ngạn is also found in other kinds of sources. Lyrics of a variety of traditional song types current among the Ngạn were transcribed and published in a short monograph on the traditional songs of the Tày and Nùng peoples in Cao Bằng (Hoàng Thị Quỳnh Nha 2003).²⁸ The lyrics

of a Northern Tai language, and in Vietnam live mainly in the northwestern provinces, close to the border with China. On the Giáy in Vietnam, see (Đặng Nghiêm Vãn 1993, 129–132). The Nùng An people are from Long'an 隆安 county in Guangxi, a county that straddles both sides of the lower reaches of the Youjiang 右江 River. They are speakers of a Northern Tai (Northern Zhuang) dialect, the Yongbei 邕北 (Northern Yongning 邕寧) sub-dialect. For a brief description of this sub-dialect, see (Zhang Junru 1999, 57–60).

²⁷ The three-fold division of Tai languages is based on (Fang Kuei Li 1977).

²⁸ Hoàng Thị Quỳnh Nha is a folk singer specialising in the performance of traditional songs of the various Nùng groups in eastern Cao Bằng. This volume includes sample scores of

are rendered in a form of transcription based on the romanised script used for Tày in Vietnam and are accompanied by a facing Vietnamese translation. The lyrics are accompanied by background information on the Ngan, and the musical score of a sample four-line stanza of song in Western-style five-line notation.²⁹ Selected stanzas from quite a number of different song genres are transcribed, including wooing songs sung antiphonally by boys and girls, songs for the New Year and the third month, road songs, night songs, martial arts training songs, and brigands' songs.

The brigands' songs are of particular interest, since they are found also in the Youjiang region, in Tianzhou 田州 and as far east as Mashan 馬山 county in central Guangxi, but nowhere else, it seems. The lyrics narrate the experiences of common soldiers serving in the armies of a native chieftain. The Ngan lyrics are entitled 'Lượn Giặc', a title which corresponds to 'Fwen Caeg' (lit. 'brigands' songs') in the Youjiang area.³⁰ Neither Hoàng Thị Quỳnh Nha nor her co-authors had access to the lyrics of the soldiers' songs from Guangxi, so the evidence presented here indicating close correspondences in the lyrics across vast distances is entirely new. Altogether, some 12 four-line stanzas were included in the publication (Hoàng Thị Quỳnh Nha 2003, 33–36).³¹ I reproduce them in (3) below in the original transcription, together with a transcription into the International Phonetic Alphabet, a transcription into *Zhuangwen*, the official transcription system for Zhuang, and a translation into English:

song stanzas she sang, including Lượn Phủ (p. 41, as sung by the Nùng Lôi), Sli Giang (p. 71, as sung by the Nùng Giang), and Lượn Nùng An (p. 94, as sung by the Nùng An). The singing group she belonged to attended an International Traditional Music Festival (民族音樂學國際學術論壇) in Taiwan in 2002. The work listed under Hoàng Thị Quỳnh Nha as author was actually a collective endeavour; the names of some of the other contributors are listed at the front of the volume. At least one, Vương Hùng, was a scholar attached to the Cao Bằng cultural department. The Ngan material was collected by Triệu Thị Mai.

- 29 The section on the Ngan is on pp. 12–40. The musical score is on p. 12. From the score one can see that Ngan songs were sung in two-part harmony, like traditional song in the Youjiang area of west-central Guangxi.
- 30 The southern term 'lượn' is used instead of *fwen* 'traditional song', which is the Northern Zhuang dialect word.
- 31 The place where the songs were collected is not mentioned; nor is it clear whether the singers had song booklets recording the song lyrics, as singers do in Pingguo and elsewhere.

(3)

Original transcription	IPA (draft)	<i>Zhuangwen</i> (draft)
1		
Pường liều phật liều phừ	puwŋɿ lieuɿ fetɿ lieuɿ fuɿ	Biengz riuz fwd riuz fwz
Liều tăng hủ nhọc vác	lieuɿ tɛŋɿ huɿ nɔkɿ va:kɿ	Riuz daengz haw nyug vak
Hác tức sử hủn má	ha:kɿ tu:kɿ ɬuɿ hu:nɿ maɿ	Hak dwk saw hwnj ma
Cháu Chiêu Phà dắc luôn	tɕauɿ tɕieuɿ faɿ jakɿ luonɿ	Gyaeuj Gyeuz Faz yaek luenh

People spread all kinds of rumours,
 They say that the market will fall.
 The official issues a document that comes up,
 The bridgehead of Qiaofa is about to convulse.

2

Pỉ nỉ pỉ cái mà	piɿ niɿ piɿ ka:iɿ maɿ	Bi neix bi gijmaz
Hầu chàng nà oóc nang	hauɿ tɕa:ŋɿ naɿ ɔ:kɿ na:ŋɿ	Haeux gyang naz ok nangh
Slấy cượt đáng quá lớn	ɬɿɿ kʉwɿtɿ ja:ŋɿ kuaɿ lɔnɿ	Saeq gwed yangj gvaq roen
Pường Quang Tổng dắc luôn	puwŋɿ kwa:ŋɿ tɔŋɿ jakɿ luonɿ	Biengz Gvangj Doeng yaek luenh

What kind of year is this year?
 The rice in the wet-fields puts forth capsicles.
 Chieftains shouldering swords pass by along the road,
 The domain of Guangdong is about to convulse.

3

Pản cốn pản sặc pỉ	pa:nɿ ko:nɿ pa:nɿ ɕɛkɿ piɿ	Ban gonq ban caeg beix
Pản nỉ pản sặc hổi	pa:nɿ niɿ pa:nɿ ɕɛkɿ ho:iɿ	Ban neix ban caeg hoiq
Slông hổi nàu bo pảy	ɬo:ŋɿ ho:iɿ nauɿ ʔboɿ paiɿ	Song hoiq naeuz mbouj bae
Hứ pù lầu pảy lư	huɿ puɿ lɛuɿ paiɿ luɿ	Hawj bouxlawz bae lawh

The last consignment was to call up our brothers,
 This consignment is to call up us.
 If the two of us say we won't go,
 Who will we get to go in our stead?

4

Pây sặc dù	paiꞵ cəkꞵ ʔduꞵ	Bae caeg ndux
Pây sam dù ầu pua	paiꞵ cə:mꞵ ju:ꞵ auꞵ puaꞵ	Bae cam youx aeu buh
Ấu pua mà lồng đặng	auꞵ puaꞵ maꞵ lo:ŋꞵ ʔda:ŋꞵ	Aeu buh ma roengz ndang
Tầu bát vàng bát vay	təuꞵ ʔba:tꞵ va:ŋꞵ ʔba:tꞵ vaiꞵ	Dawz mbat vangz mbat vaeh

In this campaign at first,
We went and asked our darlings for some clothes.
Some clothes to bring and put down on our bodies,
To ward off bullets from the side or straight on.

5

Hối tiêm tin pây sặc	ho:iꞵ tiemꞵ tinꞵ paiꞵ cəkꞵ	Hoiq diemj din bae caeg
Tều lấp pây so dù	te:uꞵ ləpꞵ paiꞵ cəꞵ ju:ꞵ	Deuz laep bae coh youx
Hẩn dù nằng hèn phi	hənꞵ ju:ꞵ nəŋꞵ he:nꞵ fiꞵ	Raen youx naengh henz feiz
Sòn bo đi bo tăng	cənꞵ ʔboꞵ ʔdiꞵ ʔboꞵ tɛŋꞵ	Coenz mbouj ndei mbouj daengq

We are setting foot out on campaign,
Treading through the dark we go toward our darling's place.
We see our darlings sitting by the side of the fire,
If your words are not good then don't say them.

6

Từ mặc sạ háu phắc	tuꞵ ma:kꞵ cəꞵ hauꞵ fəkꞵ	Dawz maeg cax haeuj faek
Phắc sạ lắc táo tính	fəkꞵ cəꞵ lekꞵ ta:uꞵ tiŋꞵ	Faek cax laek dauq dingj
Pay diều minh diều hoãn	paiꞵ je:uꞵ miŋꞵ je:uꞵ hoənꞵ	Bae yeuq mingh yeuq hon
Ná ngòn lầu đẩy táo	na:ꞵ ŋoŋꞵ leuꞵ ʔdaiꞵ ta:uꞵ	Naq ngoenzlawz ndaej dauq

Take the sword and put it in the scabbard,
Turn the scabbard around down and up.
Go as if life and soul depend on it,
Who knows what day we will get to return.

7

Hùn pây pần búng bà	hunꞵ paiꞵ penꞵ ʔbuŋꞵ ʔbaꞵ	Vunz bae baenz mbungjmbax
Mà pây pần đúng đỉnh	maꞵ paiꞵ penꞵ ʔduŋꞵ ʔdiŋꞵ	Max bae baenz ndungjndingq
Kỳ đỉnh cấp kỳ hồng	kiꞵ ʔdiŋꞵ kəpꞵ kiꞵ hoŋꞵ	Giz nding gaep giz hoengz
Tằng Quang Tong tả xướng	tɛŋꞵ kuanꞵ tɔŋꞵ taꞵ suɔŋꞵ	Daengz Guengjdoeng daj ciengq

The men go forward like butterflies,
 The horses go forward like mole crickets.
 Flags of crimson mix with flags of red,
 We're going to Guangdong to do battle.

8

Phản hùn lúm phản chối	fən\ hun\ lum\ fən\ tɕo:i\	Faenz vunz lumj faenz gyoij
Lỗi hùn lúm lỗi sược	lo:i\ hun\ lum\ lo:i\ ɕuɔk\	Roix vunz lumj roix cweg
Lược lấy pần lằm lồng	luɔk\ lai\ pen\ ləm\ lo:ŋ\	Lwed lae baenz raemx rongz
Cháu cống pần lín lái	tɕeu\ ko:ŋ\ pen\ lin\ lai\	Gyaeuj gong baenz rin raiq

Cutting down men is like cutting down plantains,
 Rows of men are like bunches of wild bananas.
 The blood flows like a flood of water,
 The heads pile up like stones on a dyke.

9

Sính mà háu tu chốc	ɕiŋ\ ma\ hau\ tu\ tɕo:k\	Cingq max haeuj duh gyok
Mà phản phộc lì lìn	ma\ fən\ fo:k\ li\ lin\	Max faenx fog lizlinz
Sính mà háu tu sinh	ɕiŋ\ ma\ hau\ tu\ ɕiŋ\	Cingq max haeuj duh cingz
An mà đỉnh pần lược	a:n\ ma\ ʔdiŋ\ pen\ luɔt\	An max nding baenz lwed

Drag the horse into the gate of the fort,
 The horse goes deep in dust and dirt.
 Drag the horse into the gate of the city,
 The horse's saddle is as red as blood.

10

Siến pác súng táo lá	ɕien\ pa:k\ ɕuŋ\ ta:u\ la\	Cienq bak cungq dauq laj
Tải siên há phan slí	ta:i\ ɕien\ ha\ fa:n\ ʔi\	Dai cien haj fanh seiq
Tải siên nghi mà hồng	ta:i\ ɕien\ ŋi\ ma\ ho:ŋ\	Dai cien ngeih max hoengz
Bo tải tòng dù nôi	ʔbo\ ta:i\ tɕŋ\ ju\ noi\	Mbouj dai doengz youx noi

We turn the gun muzzle downwards,
 Lying dead are a thousand five and ten thousand four.
 Lying dead are a thousand two hundred red horses,
 You won't die yourself my little darling.

11

Hối pây sắc táo mã	hoi ¹ pai ¹ ɕək ¹ ta:u ¹ ma ¹	Hoiq bae caeg dauq ma
Lực mà rả lì nôl	luk ¹ ma ¹ ɣa ¹ li ¹ no:i ¹	Lwg max ra lix noi ¹
Lì nôl rất cả ỉn	li ¹ no:i ¹ ɣat ¹ ka ¹ in ¹	Lix noi ¹ rat ga in
Lấp mà nín kiều ly	lep ¹ ma ¹ nin ¹ kje:u ¹ li ¹	Raep ma ninj gyeuz lih

We are coming back from soldiering,
 We looked for horses but there are still too few.
 They're still too few and our feet hurt,
 When dark comes we sleep in Qiaoli.

12

Hối pây sắc táo mã	hoi ¹ pai ¹ ɕək ¹ ta:u ¹ ma ¹	Hoiq bae caeg dauq ma
Đầy sống cả luồng chú	ʔdai ¹ ʔo:ŋ ¹ ka ¹ luo:ŋ ¹ tɕu ¹	Ndaex song ga luongz gyu
Đầy sống cu hải pòng	ʔdai ¹ ʔo:ŋ ¹ ku ¹ hai ¹ pɔŋ ¹	Ndaex song guh haiz boengz
Mà hấu tông diều dương	ma ¹ hɛu ¹ tɔŋ ¹ je:u ¹ juwŋ ¹	Maz hawj doengz yeuq yiengh

We are coming back from soldiering,
 One step goes up and several go down.
 Our two pairs of shoes become rotten with mud,
 We'll let our darling companions have a look.

These verses are evidently excerpts from a much longer song cycle, though how much longer is a question that remains to be investigated. In the west-central Guangxi area, song cycles of brigands' songs have anywhere between around 600 lines to 3600. The text from Matouzhen 馬頭鎮 which Meng Yuanyao and I have edited and annotated is 2088 lines long. These songs are sung antiphonally between men and women singers at traditional 'song festivals', with two men singing a stanza of song and two women answering with a responding stanza. In the Matouzhen song-text, but also in Pingguo and Tiandong 田東 counties generally, the stanzas consist of four lines of five syllables each; occasionally opening lines of three syllables are also found, as in stanza 4 above. By contrast, brigands' songs are also sung further west in the Tianyang 田陽 area, but there they are sung in a different style, with stanzas of indeterminate length, varying between 7 and 15 lines or even longer.³² The lyrics here correspond to the pattern found in Pingguo and Tiandong.

32 On the song style called *fwen Nganx* ('Tianzhou mode'), see (Zhang Shengzhen 1997) and Section 8 below.

What is more, many of the above stanzas have the same lyrics as those in the Matouzheng manuscript. Almost half of the stanzas are exactly the same, while others have one or two lines that correspond. The correspondences are shown in (4) below (cf. Holm and Meng 2021, 179, 208–209, 239, 252, 368, 308, 362–363, 311, 369–370, 411–412, and 439):

- (4) Stanza 1: cf. lines 197–200
 Stanza 2: = lines 401–404
 Stanza 3: no exact match
 Stanza 4: = lines 617–619, 620 different
 Stanza 5: close match for lines 705–708
 Stanza 6: cf. line 1522 ff.
 Stanza 7: = lines 1097–1100
 Stanza 8: = lines 1481–1482
 Stanza 9: cf. lines 1121–1122
 Stanza 10: = lines 1529–1532
 Stanza 11: cf. lines 1819, 1820, 1828
 Stanza 12: = lines 2017–2020

Further investigation is needed. It is reasonably well-documented that families from the area of present-day Pingguo – formerly the chieftaincy of Si'en fu 思恩府 – were also given to fleeing to the northern part of Vietnam in times of military disturbance or serious drought, as were people in other parts of the Youjiang region and southwestern Guangxi more widely.³³ It is reported that there are still communities of people from Pingguo in present-day Napo 那坡 county in far southwestern Guangxi, just to the north of Cao Bằng.³⁴ So it is not inconceivable that there may now be communities of people from these other areas living cheek-by-jowl with military migrants from the Tianzhou heartland. Further comments:

The translation into Vietnamese is reasonably accurate, though there are a few places where it misses words entirely, e.g., it misses out on *ndungjndingq* ‘mole crickets’ in stanza 7 and also the place-name Gyeuzlih in stanza 11.³⁵ In

33 See (Holm and Meng 2015). See also (Holm 2019).

34 Nong Minjian 農敏堅, personal communication, May 2019. Napo was a staging post for other Tai-speaking migrants heading south to Vietnam.

35 Qiaoli 喬利 is a place in the western part of present-day Mashan 馬山 county in central Guangxi, to the east of Pingguo. During the Ming dynasty, from 1442 onward, it was the seat of government for the powerful chieftaincy of Si'en 思恩 (Holm and Meng 2021, 28).

a few places it gives a general translation for a line or phrase rather than a literal translation. The translation is particularly useful where the Ngạn text is different from the Pingguo text.

7 The Language of the Ngạn Lyrics

The language of these lyrics is clearly a Northern Zhuang dialect, very close to the language of the Youjiang area. Tone 1 is indicated by a symbol like a question mark (? , *thanh hỏi*) over the vowel, indicating a falling then rising tone, e.g., *pъy* 'to go'. Tones 2 and 4 are very close together, and both marked with the same falling tone mark (' , *thanh huyền*), e.g., *tằng* 'to arrive', and *mà* 'horse'. Tones 3 and 5 are apparently also close together, and both marked with a rising tone mark (' , *thanh sắc*), e.g., *táo lá*, Zh. *dauq laj* 'return below'. This could either be a high rising tone (35) or a high even tone (44 or 55). The 6th tone is unmarked and is probably a mid-even tone (33). The use of the dot underneath the vowel for Tone 8 words (*thanh nặng*) indicates that these are low falling tones, like 21. Some words with Tone 3 in Standard Zhuang are given in the Ngạn transcription with a tone 4 mark, thus in stanza 11 there is *lì nôi*, Zh. *lìx noi*h 'still a few' rather than *lìj noi*h. Also, Ngạn has mostly affricates in place of *gy-* /*kj-*/ initials; these are written with a 'ch' in the Ngạn transcription. Thus *cháu*, Zh. *gyaeuj* 'head' in stanza 8.³⁶

If we compare the Ngạn lyrics with Zhuang dialect survey information about the Youjiang and Pingguo dialects of Zhuang, we find that they match up fairly closely (Guangxi qu Yuwei yanjiushi 1994, 250–262).³⁷ Apart from the absence of aspirated initial consonants and other general features of Northern Tai, the Youjiang and Pingguo dialects are characterised by the following features, listed in (5) below:

- (5) affricate initial /*tɕ-*/ instead of *by-* /*pj-*/ and *gy-* /*kj-*/;
initial *l-* instead of *r-* /*ɣ-*/;
finals *-ia* and *-ua* with an *-a* /*ɐ*/ offglide;

36 There are a few mistakes in the Ngạn transcription, such as *nôi* (with an initial 'n') written instead of *hỏi* *hoiq* 'serf; I' at one point; I have corrected this. There are also some wrong tone marks, but not very many.

37 The Youjiang dialect is spoken in Bose 百色, Tianyang, and Tiandong. Pronunciation is reported to be fairly uniform throughout this area. Pingguo is just to the east.

- finals /-ei/ and /-ou/ realised as /-i/ and /-u/;
- final -w /-u/ instead of -aw /-ɛw/;
- initials beginning with a glottal stop /mb-/ , /nd-/ and /ʔ-/ pronounced in 4th tone, rather than 3rd; thus *oij* ‘sugarcane’ pronounced as *oix* / ʔoi⁴/ and *ndaej* ‘to get’ pronounced as *ndaex* /ʔdei⁴/.

All of these features are found in the Ngan lyrics. Furthermore, the tone values for the Youjiang and Pingguo dialects also match up reasonably well with the tonal characteristics mentioned above, as shown in (6):

(6) Tones in the Youjiang and Pingguo dialects

	Youjiang	Pingguo
Tone 1	214	314
Tone 2	31	42
Tone 3	55	55
Tone 4	33	21
Tone 5	35	35
Tone 6	22	33
Tone 7 short	55	55
Tone 7 long	35	55, 35
Tone 8 short	22	21
Tone 8 long	33	21, 33

Of course, these are matters that need to be followed up with targeted fieldwork. There are also many specific lexical items in Hoàng Thị Quỳnh Nha’s Ngan lyrics that match up with those found in popular song in the Youjiang-Pingguo area. We have space here to list only a few items in (7):³⁸

- (7) tẩn pua ‘to put on clothes’ (p. 23) (-ua final as opposed to -u, with an /-a/ offglide)
- chảnh ngòn ‘the sun’ (p. 22) (*ch-* initial) (Standard Zhuang *gyangngoenz*)

38 Many of these items can be matched up with vocabulary found in the traditional songs of Tianzhou and Tiandong, others with those found in the brigands’ songs of Pingguo. For Tiandong and Tianzhou, see the two volumes of texts edited by Zhang Shengzhen, (Zhang Shengzhen 1993) and (Zhang Shengzhen 1997). For the songs of Pingguo, see (Holm and Meng 2021).

cái lặc	‘don’t’ (p. 24)
phường	‘domain’ (pp. 24,30 etc.) (- <i>ư</i> - vowel rather than - <i>a</i> -)
phừa	‘other people’ (p. 26) (/ - <i>a</i> / offglide)
bàn	‘village’ (p. 31) (4th tone rather than 3rd tone)
cà hểc	‘to be a guest’ (p. 31) (<i>cà</i> as a lectal variant of <i>guh</i> ‘to do’)
tả xướng	‘to fight a battle’ (p. 35) (- <i>ư</i> - vowel)
rừ	‘you’ (p.27, a special morpheme found only in this sub-dialect)
dù nôi	‘little darling’ (passim)

Some of these lexical items are only found in the Youjiang area. Again, further fieldwork is necessary.

Ideally, at this point in the argument, we should have a section discussing general Ngạn phonology, based on modern descriptions of the living speaker-populations, and then compare this with the phonology in the folk-song lyrics and then with other Zhuang dialects in geographically relevant areas. Such a systematic comparison would be eminently worthwhile, but it would require sufficient space to fill another article and is a task for the future. Fieldwork has not yet progressed to the point where linguistic data sufficient to establish a general phonology of Ngạn – as opposed to a phonetic description – have been collected. That task would entail recording lexical items in isolation from a range of speakers from different localities as well as stretches of connected speech. What we have at the moment is a recording of a chanted recitation of a ritual text by a single speaker. In ritual chanting, tone contours are somewhat different from those of everyday speech, even if we can be confident that syllable initials and finals are relatively reliable as a guide to ordinary pronunciation. What we have done above is compare this data and the transcription of the Ngạn lyrics with the detailed phonetic data we collected in Pingguo for *The Brigands’ Song* (see Introduction pp. 64–77). The discussion there also takes into account some of the features of the dialect of Tianyang and Tiandong to the west, since the pronunciation of the lyrics in Pingguo showed signs of dialect mixing.

8

The Name Ngạn Revisited

Evidence from the Youjiang area can also be brought to bear on the ethnonym of the Ngạn. ‘Nganx’ (ɲan⁴) is widely current in the area as the Zhuang name

for Tianzhou, which like other toponyms is also referred to in Zhuang by such collocations as *Gyang Nganx*, lit. 'in Tianzhou'. The songs of Tianzhou are known as *fwen Nganx*, where *fwen* is the usual word in Zhuang for traditional song. In the Tianzhou area, it is well known that the word *nganx* refers to the longan tree and its fruit. The word *nganx* itself is a Han loan-word from 眼 *yǎn* 'eye', as in 龍眼 *lóngyǎn* 'longan', lit. 'dragon-eye'. The word for 'longan' (the fruit) in Zhuang is listed in Zhang Junru's (1999, Wordlist item 235, 629) Zhuang dialect wordlist. In Tiandong and Pingguo the pronunciation is *ma:k⁹ ɲa:n⁴*, where *ma:k⁹* is the usual word for 'fruit' and *ɲa:n⁴* corresponds to Late Middle Chinese *ɲjan*' (Pulleyblank 1991, 357). The fruit itself was produced in considerable quantities in Guangxi and widely marketed throughout China from the Song period (960–1279 CE) onward, and was considered prestigious enough to serve as a tribute item.³⁹ Near the city of Tianzhou, along the river, there used to be extensive orchards of longan trees and young people in the area were accustomed to go into the orchards to sing with each other in the local song mode, which came to be known as *fwen nganx*. This style of singing subsequently spread to neighbouring districts, to present-day Bose and part of Tiandong, and even up north as far as Bama 巴馬, Lingyun 凌雲 and Tianlin 田林. During the Ming dynasty, the song mode was also carried far afield by contingents of native troops from Tianzhou fighting in campaigns on behalf of the imperial armies, such as that against the Wo 倭寇 pirates in Zhejiang (Zhang Shengzhen 1997, Introduction 1). All this evidence serves to indicate that it is reasonable to suppose that the ethnonym Ngan in Cao Bằng is connected with the Zhuang toponym for Tianzhou.

9 Mogong Texts

The case for a connection of the Ngan with the Youjiang area is considerably strengthened by evidence from Ngan family registers and vernacular-language texts recited by Ngan ritual specialists.⁴⁰ I have analysed both of these in a separate book chapter (Holm 2021). A family register (*jiapu* 家譜) in the possession of the priest I interviewed stated clearly and explicitly that the founding ancestor came from Tianzhou.⁴¹ Tianzhou was a large and powerful

39 The cultural importance of the longan fruit is discussed in some detail in (Holm and Meng 2021, 571) (ethnographic note to line 1361).

40 On *mogong*, male ritual specialists who recite texts written in the vernacular language, see (Holm 2017).

41 See (Holm 2021, 971) for a photograph of the relevant page. The specific village mentioned has yet to be located.

chieftaincy during the Ming, and was particularly active in supplying native troops for imperial campaigns. In the same publication I also demonstrated that both the format of the text-based *mogong* recitations – the formulaic opening lines, for example – and the details of the vernacular script itself, showed a clear link with the *mogong* texts found in the Tianzhou area, with some admixture of Tày borrowings in both ritual vocabulary and graphic usage.⁴² Vernacular scripts from Guizhou, by contrast, are largely based on readings derived from Southwestern Mandarin, a more recent layer dating from the Ming, and exhibit a very low level of correspondence with scripts from the Tianzhou area (Holm 2013, 747).

10 Conclusions

What we can conclude at this stage, based on evidence from China as well as fieldwork in Vietnam and Vietnamese scholarly reports, is that the Ngan in all probability came from the Tianzhou area along the Youjiang River in west-central Guangxi, rather than from Guizhou. The name Ngan itself points to a connection with Tianzhou, which was known in the Zhuang language as Nganx (Ngan⁴). Evidence from traditional song texts presented here seems to link them closely with the chieftaincy of Si'en 思恩, another large chieftaincy centered in the area of present-day Pingguo county, further to the east. Si'en was a chieftaincy ruled during the Ming dynasty by a collateral branch of the Cen 岑 lineage, so there was a family connection with the chiefly house of Tianzhou in any case. It is possible of course that the original Ngan troops came from more than one locality in the same general region; that is a matter for further investigation in the field. Other Ngan communities may turn out to have somewhat different dialects and traditions.⁴³ Further fieldwork in the area may well resolve other questions that must remain unanswered at this stage.

42 The percentage correlation between the vernacular script in the Ngan ritual manuscript and the Tianzhou script was found to be 86%, a very high percentage considering the geographic distance between Tianzhou and Cao Bằng, and the long time said to have elapsed since the Ngan people's arrival in Cao Bằng (Holm 2021, 977). On the Tày scripts see (Holm 2020b).

43 By analogy, it was reported to me in Quảng Uyên district that there were actually four different sub-groups of Nùng An people in the district (D. Holm, fieldwork Quảng Uyên, August 2015). If true, this has major implications for future research. For areas north of the China-Vietnam border, also, I have demonstrated the need to conduct linguistic and ethnographic fieldwork on a village-by-village basis (Holm 2010).

Another important question here is whether the Ngạn in Cao Bằng have had any continuing contact with their original homelands since their transplantation during the Ming period, or, for that matter, any contact with Zhuang in-migrants from Tianzhou or Pingguo. This is a matter for future investigation in the field. If the answer is 'no', then that would have very definite implications for the dating of the Ngạn song lyrics, which would have to pre-date the move of the Ngạn down to Cao Bằng. One way or the other, such circumstances would also be relevant to dating the Brigands' Songs in Guangxi, which are usually thought to date from the Ming dynasty, but in the absence of any surviving manuscripts that date from that time. In the Pingguo area, at least, the lyrics are known to have been unusually stable, since they were written down in small songbooks, but it is also clear that they have been subject to various kinds of changes in recent times.

Methodologically, this study demonstrates that traditional song lyrics can be useful in tracing original homelands. Jerold Edmondson and Li Jinfang in their paper on 'The Language Corridor' (Edmondson and Li 1996) showed how close phonetic analysis of local language data could be used to track migrations in past history and develop hypotheses about where people came from. A follow-up article (Holm 2020a) and my book chapter on the Ngạn (Holm 2021) suggest that vernacular writing systems – writing systems, that is, that are un-standardised and vary from place to place – can also be used for the same purpose. Moreover, analysis of vernacular writing systems can also be used to prove cases to the contrary – that is, to demonstrate a lack of cultural interaction or low level of interaction between people in different localities. Here we have a third body of information that can be brought to bear on the same question. In the case of writing systems and song lyrics, we have linguistic or para-linguistic cultural forms that carry a vast amount of ancillary information – information about ritual protocols, or in the case of traditional song lyrics, information about poetics, rhyming patterns and song styles – that can provide strong support for hypotheses based on spoken language data. Moreover, since writing systems and song lyrics bear traces of past cultural and social action in a way that is relatively easy to spot and particularly amenable to big data analysis, they are in some ways much better as a starting point for generating hypotheses about past migrations and long-forgotten socio-cultural interactions than spoken language data studied in isolation.

Acknowledgements

In Guangxi my principal collaborator over many years has been Professor Meng Yuanyao of the Guangxi University for Nationalities. My other long-time research associate was the late Ling Shudong, formerly Deputy Director of the Zhuang Ethnological Museum in Jingxi. In Vietnam my chief collaborator has been Professor Trần Trí Dõi of the National University for Humanities and Social Sciences Hanoi. Many thanks are due to him and my research assistant Bùi Hải Bình for their invaluable assistance. I am also grateful to Nguyễn Thị Hải for her help in providing archival materials needed for the revision of this article, and to two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. The map was prepared by Ms. Chandra Jayasuriya of the University of Melbourne School of Geography, Earth and Atmospheric Sciences.

Funding

Research on which this article was based was supported by an Australian Research Council-funded large grant project on The Old Zhuang Script, 1996–1999. Subsequent support came from a research grant from the Science Council of Taiwan (MOST) from 2011 to 2017, project title “Vernacular Character Writing Systems among the Tai-speaking Peoples of Southwest China and Northern Vietnam” (grant nos. 102-2410-H-004-055–, 103-2410-H-004-111–, and 104-2410-H-004-162–).

References

- Bế Huỳnh 閉莢. 1921. *Cao Bằng tạp chí* 高平雜誌 [Miscellaneous records on Cao Bằng]. Cao Bằng.
- Bế Viết Đăng. 1973. ‘Những kết quả bước đầu của công tác xác định thành phần dân tộc’ [Some preliminary results of the work of determining ethnic categories], *Thông báo dân tộc học* [Ethnological Bulletin], số 3.
- Đặng Nghiêm Vạn et al. 1993. *Ethnic Minorities in Vietnam*. Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers.
- Edmondson, Jerold A. 2002. ‘Nùng An: origin of a species’ in Robert S. Bauer, ed., *Collected papers on Southeast Asian and Pacific Languages*. Canberra: Pacific Linguistics, pp. 530–551.
- Edmondson, Jerold A., and Li Jinfang. 1996. ‘The Language Corridor’ in Iam Thongdee, ed., *Pan-Asiatic Linguistics: Proceedings of the Fourth International Symposium on Languages and Linguistics*, Jan. 8–10, 1996, Vol. III, pp. 983–90.

- Goodrich, L. Carrington, ed. 1976. *Dictionary of Ming Biography, 1368–1644*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Guangxi qu Yuwei yanjiushi 廣西區語委研究室, ed. 1994. *Zhuangyu fangyan tuyu yinxì* 壯語方言土語音系 [Phonology of Zhuang Dialects and Lects]. Nanning: Guangxi minzu chubanshe.
- Hoàng Thị Quỳnh Nha. 2003. *Sli lượn hát đôi của người Tày Nùng ở Cao Bằng* [Anti-phonol songs of the Tày and Nùng in Cao Bằng]. Hanoi: Nhà xuất bản Văn hóa Thông tin.
- Hoàng Văn Ma. 2009. 'Người Ngạn và Suy nghĩ về vấn đề xác định thành phần dân tộc' [The Ngạn people and some thoughts on the question of determining their ethnic composition]. in Tạ Văn Thông, ed.-in-chief, *Tìm hiểu Ngôn ngữ các dân tộc ở Việt Nam* [Investigations into the languages of the ethnic groups of Vietnam]. Hanoi: Nhà xuất bản Khoa học Xã hội, pp. 318–330.
- Holm, David. 2010. 'Linguistic Diversity along the China-Vietnam Border'. *Linguistics of the Tibeto-Burman Area* 33:2, 1–63. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1075/ltba>.
- Holm, David. 2013. *Mapping the Old Zhuang Character Script: A Vernacular Writing System from Southern China*. Leiden: Brill.
- Holm, David. 2017. 'Mogong and Chieftaincy in western Guangxi and Southeast Asia'. *Asian Ethnicity* 18:2 (March 2017), 173–189.
- Holm, David. 2018. 'A Layer of Old Chinese Readings in the Old Zhuang Script'. *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 79/80, 197–244.
- Holm, David. 2020a. 'The Language Corridor Revisited: Observations on Historical Context and Evidence from Vernacular Scripts'. *Journal of Chinese Writing Systems* 4(2), 71–86. doi: 10.1177/2513850219919810.
- Holm, David. 2020b. 'The Tày and Zhuang vernacular scripts: Preliminary comparisons'. *Journal of Chinese Writing Systems* 4(3), 197–213. doi: 10.1177/2513850219919810.
- Holm, David. 2021. 'Where did the Ngạn People Come From? Ritual Manuscripts among the Ngạn in Northern Vietnam'. in Jörg B. Quenzer, ed. *Exploring Written Artefacts: Objects, Methods, and Concepts*. Berlin: De Gruyter, pp. 967–988.
- Holm, David, and Meng Yuanyao, eds. 2015. *Hanvueng: The Goose King and the Ancestral King, an Epic from Guangxi in Southern China*. Zhuang Traditional Texts series no. 1, Leiden: Brill.
- Holm, David, and Meng Yuanyao, eds. 2021. *The Brigands' Song: Serving in the Army of a Native Chieftain, A Traditional Song Text from Guangxi in Southern China*, Zhuang Traditional Texts series no. 2, Leiden: Brill.
- Hucker, Charles O. 1985. *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Hudak, Thomas John, ed. 1991. *William J. Gedney's The Yay Language: Glossary, Texts, and Translations*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies.

- Lã Văn Lô and Đặng Nghiệm Vạn. 1968. *Sơ lược giới thiệu các nhóm dân tộc Tày, Nùng, Thái ở Việt Nam* [An introductory sketch of the ethnic groups of the Tày, Nùng and Thái in Vietnam]. Hanoi: Nhà xuất bản Khoa học xã hội.
- Leblond, Major. 1908. 'Esquisse historique du territoire de Cao Bang', dated 13 November 1908.
- Li, Fang Kuei. 1977. *A Handbook of Comparative Tai*. Honolulu: University Press of Hawai'i.
- Li Hui 李輝. 2002. 'Baiyue yichuan jiegou de yi yuan er fen jixiang' 百越遺傳結構的一元二分跡象 [Traces of unitary origin and bifurcation in the genetic structure of the Hundred Yue]. *Guangxi minzu yanjiu* 廣西民族研究 4, 26–31.
- Ngô Sĩ Liên 吳仕連. repr. 1986. *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* 大越史記全書 [Complete Historical Records of the Great Vietnamese kingdom], ed. Chen Jinghe 陳荆和. Tokyo: Tōkyō daigaku Tōyō bunko kenkyūjo 東京大學東洋文化研究所.
- Nguyễn Thị Hải. 2009. 'Nà Lữ (Hòa An Cao Bằng) từ thế kỷ IX đến nửa đầu thế kỷ XIX'. MA thesis, Vietnamese history, National University Hanoi University of Social Sciences and Humanities.
- Nguyễn Thị Hải. 2018. *La marche de Cao Bằng: La Cour et les gardiens de frontière, des origines aux conséquences de la réforme de Minh Mạng*. Paris: Presses de l'Inalco.
- Pulleyblank, Edwin G. 1991. *Lexicon of Reconstructed Pronunciation in Early Middle Chinese, Late Middle Chinese, and Early Mandarin*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- Tỉnh ủy – Hội đồng Nhân dân Ủy ban Nhân dân Tỉnh Cao Bằng, Viện Sử Học Việt Nam, eds. 2009. *Lịch sử Tỉnh Cao Bằng* [History of the province of Cao Bằng]. Hanoi: Nhà xuất bản Chính trị Quốc gia.
- Triệu Thị Mai. 2009. *Hành trình đi tìm vía của pụt Ngạn* [The journey to go in search of lost vital spirits among the Ngạn vernacular priests]. Hanoi: Nhà xuất bản Từ điển bách khoa.
- Triệu Thị Mai. 2013. *Heo phươn dân ca Nùng An* [Singing airs: Folk songs of the Nùng An]. Hanoi: Nhà xuất bản Văn hóa thông tin.
- Triệu Thị Mai and Ma Văn Hàn, eds. 2011. *Những khúc ca cầu trường thọ của bụt Ngạn* [Songs for praying for longevity of the Ngạn vernacular priests]. Hanoi: Nhà xuất bản Văn hóa dân tộc.
- Ty Văn hóa Cao Bằng, ed. and pub. 1963. *Sơ thảo lịch sử Cao Bằng* [A preliminary discussion of the history of Cao Bằng]. Cao Bằng.
- Vương Hùng (undated). 'Văn hóa Ngạn' [The culture of the Ngạn]. Nghiên cứu sưu tầm, chưa công bố [unpublished research report].
- Vương Xuân Tình, ed.-in-chief. 2016. *Các dân tộc ở Việt Nam, Tập 2 Nhóm ngôn ngữ Tày-Thái Kadai* [Ethnic groups in Vietnam, Vol. 2 The Tày-Thái and Kadai language group]. Hanoi: Nhà xuất bản Chính Trị Quốc gia.

- Zhang Junru 張均如 et al. 1999. *Zhuangyu fangyan yanjiu* 壯語方言研究 [Research on Zhuang dialects]. Chengdu: Sichuan minzu chubanshe.
- Zhang Shengzhen 張聲震, ed.-in-chief. 1993. *Zhuangzu minge guji jicheng: Qingge, (1) Liaoge* 壯族民歌古籍集成: 情歌(1) 嘹歌 [Compendium of Old Zhuang Folksong Texts: Wooing Songs, vol. 1: Liaoge]. Nanning: Guangxi minzu chubanshe.
- Zhang Shengzhen 張聲震, ed.-in-chief. 1997. *Zhuangzu minge guji jicheng: Qingge* 壯族民歌古籍集成: 情歌 [Compendium of Old Zhuang Folksong Texts: Wooing Songs]. vol. 2. Nanning: Guangxi minzu chubanshe.
- Zheng Yongchang 鄭永常. 1998. *Zhengzhan yu qishou: Mingdai Zhong-Yue guanxi yanjiu* 征戰與棄守: 明代中越關係研究 [Military incursions and abandonment: Studies on China-Vietnam relations during the Ming period]. Tainan: Guoli Chenggong daxue chubanshe.