

**MY WORK IN TIBETO-BURMAN LINGUISTICS**

DAI QINGXIA

Professor, Central Institute for Nationality Studies

[Translated by Randy J. LaPolla,  
University of California at Berkeley]

I began my study of Tibeto-Burman languages in October of 1952 at the Central Institute for Nationality Studies (CINS) in Beijing. I graduated in June 1956 with a degree in Jingpo studies. During my time as a student of the Institute, I spent a year living in a Jingpo village, learning about the Jingpo language and culture from the Jingpo people. That was when I began to develop an interest in Tibeto-Burman languages. After graduation I stayed at the CINS, teaching and doing research. Because at that time the government wanted to have writing systems developed for some of the minority nationalities, I joined a work team organized by the Academy of Sciences that went to Yunnan to do fieldwork and research on minority nationality languages. I stayed there for four years, mainly doing fieldwork and research on the Hani language. I did a broad survey of Hani dialects, and participated in the design of the Hani writing system and the writing of a Hani dictionary, a grammar, and textbooks. The years spent there increased my interest in doing research on Tibeto-Burman languages. After I returned to the CINS in 1960, I continued to teach and do research on Tibeto-Burman languages and linguistic theory. Aside from working on Jingpo and Hani, the two languages with which I am most familiar, I also did fieldwork on Achang, Zaiwa, Langsu, Leqi, Bola, Nu (Bijiang), Jinuo, Dulong, Kucong, Katzo (an Yi language used by the Mongols of Yunnan), Lipo, Xiandao, Burmese, and Kelun. I also began doing comparative work in Yi and in Tibeto-Burman. Doing comparative work opened my eyes to the broad scope of Tibeto-Burman research work. My main contributions to Tibeto-Burman studies are listed below.

(1) I completely revealed the nature of the tense-lax vowel distinction, its direction of development, its historical origins, and the relationships between the tense-lax vowel systems of different Tibeto-Burman languages (1958a, 1964, 1979). I believe there are two sources for the Tibeto-Burman tense-lax vowel distinction: one is the nature of the final, whether it is stopped or non-stopped; the other is the nature of the initial, whether it is voiced or voiceless. The direction of development is for the tense-lax distinction to be lost, with a concomitant change in the place of articulation or tone of the vowel. The distinction of tense-lax vowels is a characteristic shared by many Tibeto-Burman languages. It has a close relationship with the initials, finals, and tones, and has an important place in the

development of the entire phonological system. A recognition of the tense-lax vowel distinction, an important link in Tibeto-Burman phonology, facilitates an understanding of the characteristics of this complex system.

(2) I carried out research on other phonological characteristics of Tibeto-Burman languages, looking for the rules governing their development. One example is weak syllables (semisyllables). I studied their nature and source, and found them to arise from several sources: some from the separation of consonant clusters, some from the grammaticization or weakening of lexical items (1984a). This knowledge confirmed our understanding of the tendency for Tibeto-Burman consonant cluster initials to develop into single consonant initials, and for single syllable words to develop into bisyllabic words.

I also did a thorough analysis of the nature, characteristics, and source of the length distinction of vowels in Dulong and Leqi (1986c). The length distinction in these two languages is different from that in related languages. It is not used to distinguish lexical meaning, but interacts closely with the grammar of those languages. I believe the appearance of the length distinction in these two languages was to compensate for changes in syntax and morphology.

A third example is my thorough comparative study of the nature, source and development of voicing distinctions in the Lolo-Burmese branch of Tibeto-Burman (1981a). I pointed out that there is a tendency for distinctive voicing of initials to be lost, and that this process has two paths: one is for voiced stops, fricatives and affricates to be lost while the voiceless ones are preserved; the other is for voiceless nasals and laterals to be lost, while the voiced ones are preserved. These changes in voicing influence the divergence of the tones. One article I wrote dealt exclusively with the voiceless nasals of Achang (1985a), showing the relationship between the system of voicing distinctions in nasals in Achang and those of other related languages. I demonstrated how the voiceless nasals developed from Proto-Tibeto-Burman \*s-. I also did a study on the development of consonantal endings in Tibeto-Burman languages in which I discussed the concrete path that this development has taken, and compared it to that of Chinese (1988).

In the area of phonetic development of Tibeto-Burman languages I have a great interest in tonal divergence, and have spent quite a bit of time researching this question, yet the results up to now have been less than ideal (1985d). In the future I will continue to work on this question.

(3) As for the study of grammar, I have mainly paid attention to the relationship between phonological form and grammatical meaning. When I did a study of the causative category of verbs in Zaiwa, I looked at grammatical meaning, phonological form, and cognate relationships together, so that through a comparison of Zaiwa and related languages, I was able to uncover the internal connections and rules for development of causative morphology in Tibeto-Burman (1981e). I studied the principles of vowel collocation in coordinate compound

words in Jingpo, and showed that the order of morphemes in coordinate compound words is conditioned by the rules of vowel collocation. Generally the vowel of the first morpheme is higher than that of the second. This situation where the phonetic collocation conditions the position of the morphemes in compound words is somewhat different from the situation in some languages where the order of morphemes in compound words is conditioned by the semantics of the morphemes.

(4) I spent many years working with my wife, Assoc. Prof. Xu Xijian, and with Assoc. Prof. Yue Xiangkun and Assoc. Prof. Xiao Jiacheng to put together the *Han-Jing Cidian* (Chinese-Jingpo Dictionary) (1981b) and the *Jing-Han Cidian* (Jingpo-Chinese Dictionary) (1983f). These two dictionaries were the first dictionaries published in China with both Chinese and Jingpo. They are valuable tools for research and teaching. When we were writing these dictionaries, we collected as many words as possible, and made the definitions and notes as detailed as possible. In order to make the *Jing-Han Cidian* easier for the reader to use, we used the International Phonetic Alphabet, marked the tones, and distinguished tense from lax vowels.

(5) In the last few years I've done fieldwork on several languages in China that had not been recorded before, or had only been partially recorded, and published the results in articles or monographs (*Jianzhi*). Some examples are Achang (1983d, 1985b), Langsu (1985e), Gazhuo (1987h), Xiandao (1988), and Kelun (1987d). These materials are of value to anyone doing comparative Tibeto-Burman studies. I also did a study on the ancient text "Bai Lang Ge" ("Song of the White Wolf"), comparing its linguistic characteristics with those of modern Tibeto-Burman languages (1982b). The traditional songs of the Jingpo people have some very interesting characteristics. I did a thorough study of them from the points of view of phonetics/phonology, grammar, and lexicology, and discussed those characteristics which are different from those of modern spoken Jingpo (1987f).

(6) Within the last ten years I have become interested in the sociolinguistic aspects of China's national minority languages, and have done some studies in this regard. With Prof. Ma Xueliang I co-authored "On Linguistic Ethnology" (1981d) and "Language and Nationality" (1983a). These papers discuss the need for and viability of establishing a new discipline, "Language and Nationality," because of the mutual influence these two aspects of culture have on each other's development. In terms of theory, these papers put forward a methodology for studying a nationality through its language. Through fieldwork in the areas where the languages are spoken, I also studied bilingualism among China's national minorities, analyzing the types of bilingualism, their development, and other questions related to bilingualism (1984b, 1987e). I also studied the characteristics of code switching and the development of writing systems among China's minority nationalities (1987c, 1986d), as well as studying the special

characteristics of the Jingpo branch of Tibeto-Burman (1987b) and the relationship between the Jingpo and Zaiwa languages (1981c).

(7) In the last few years I spent quite a lot of time on the production of the "Nationalities" and "Language" volumes of the *Encyclopedia of China* (1987g and 1988b respectively), as I was Associate Editor of the Nationality Languages department, and also wrote several of the articles, e.g. "The Sino-Tibetan Language Family," "The Tibeto-Burman Language Family," "The Jingpo Language," "The Achang Language," "The Zaiwa Language." I was also Chief Editor of the Minority Languages department in the production of the *Dictionary of Nationalities* (1987i), and I am on the editorial boards of the magazine *Minzu Yuwen* and the series *Zhongguo Shaoshu Minzu Yuyan Jianzhi*.

Aside from the above, while still a student and for a short time afterward, I spent some time studying my mother tongue – the Min dialect spoken in Xianyou – and wrote a few papers. Looking at them now, though they are rough and a bit shallow, I still have warm feelings for them. Later, because I was involved in Tibeto-Burman studies, I didn't have time to do any more research on the Xianyou dialect, but I have always hoped that some day I will have the opportunity to return to the study of this language.

At the Institute I have for a long time been teaching the courses "Introduction to Linguistics," "Tibeto-Burman Linguistics," "Comparative Linguistics in the Yi branch of Tibeto-Burman," "Jingpo," "Sociolinguistics," and "Field Methods," and at Peking University I taught "Tibeto-Burman Linguistics." I have already directed three groups of Master's students in Tibeto-Burman linguistics and in sociolinguistics, and have directed American Tibeto-Burmanists who came for further study or as part of their doctoral studies. Participating in teaching has been very helpful to my Tibeto-Burman studies.

At present, I am mainly involved in Tibeto-Burman comparative-historical studies. Through the study of certain special topics, I have been investigating the rules of historical development and determining the genetic relations between languages in the family. At the same time, my wife, Prof. Yue Xiangkun and I are finishing the writing of *The Grammar of Jingpo*. In this work we are making every effort to write a complete and thorough description of the characteristics of Jingpo grammar.

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