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How Understanding Population Movements Influences our Understanding of Genetic Relationships and Language History: The Case of Min Chinese

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Abstract

Recent work which involves understanding population movements and the geographic and other aspects that have influenced population movements and language spread and diversity has begun to influence our understanding of the genetic relationships in some of the language families of the world. This paper looks at the case of Sino-Tibetan, and in particular the Min (Fujian) subgroup of Sinitic (Chinese). Earlier work on Min argued for Min having a single protolanguage (i.e., all modern Min varieties developed from a single parent), and it was seen to have broken off from the main Sinitic line earlier than all of the other varieties. This mistaken notion was due to two factors: use of a methodology other than the comparative method based on actually attested forms, and lack of attention to migration history. What we find now when we correct for those errors is that the modern Min varieties developed from the coalescence of at least two different protolanguages. Those protolanguages were the result of coalescence of at least three different major migrations into Fujian (there were actually several waves of migration), and that the idea that Min is somehow older and split off earlier is actually due to the Fujian area not joining the Sinitic cultural sphere until quite late in Chinese history (the Tang Dynasty, 7–10th century CE).

1. Introduction

In this paper I am returning to a topic I first published on 15 years ago, how the migrations of the Sino-Tibetan speakers have affected the development of the Sino-Tibetan language family (LaPolla 2001; 2022). I want to go into more detail on one aspect, the development of the southeastern varieties of Sinitic, particularly Min (閩), based on recent work by W. South Coblin and a number of other scholars, such as Shen Ruiqing (沈瑞清), Zhuang Chusheng (莊初昇), Kwok Bit-Chee (Guo Bizhi 郭必之), Akitani Hiroyuki (秋谷裕幸), and a number of others, who, in the tradition of Jerry Norman (羅杰瑞), are using empirical data and the comparative method to understand the development of the varieties of Sinitic, isolating out the historical strata and matching the findings with migrations and other events in history, and looking at the implications of their work for understanding the history of the Sinitic branch. This work is in contrast to the usual sort of philological interpretation based on rhyme books and lists of written characters, rather than on natural data, without any reference to the actual language use and history of the speakers of the varieties investigated. As I argued back in 2001, you cannot understand the history of the languages unless you understand the history of the speakers, and what we find when we work empirically is not a clean Stammbaum (family tree) but a much more complex history, as the history of China is one of migration and language contact, which led to convergences and hybridization of different varieties over and over again. This new understanding leads to a very different understanding of the development of the Sinitic varieties and in particular the Min branch of Sinitic.

2. The Historical Expansion

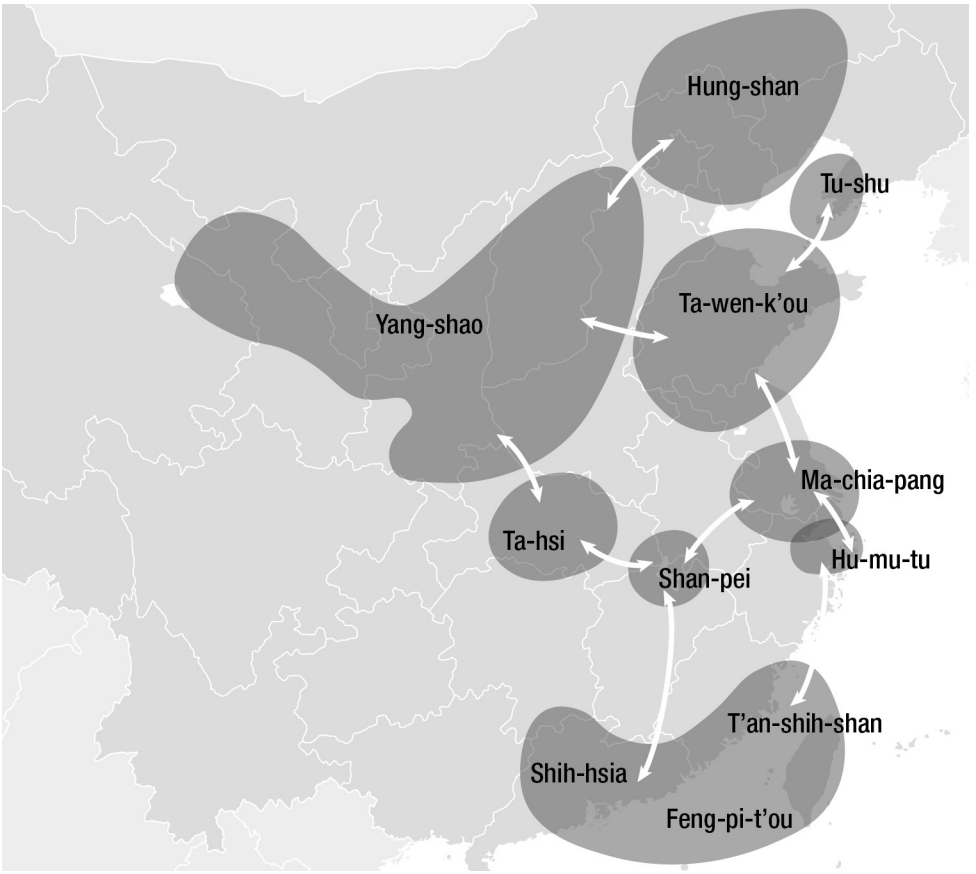
As I discussed in LaPolla 2001, 2019, and 2022, the origins of the people we now call the Chinese (and the Sino-Tibetans generally) are understood to have been in the middle reaches of the Yellow River valley of what is now north China around 6,000 years ago, as represented in the Neolithic Yangshao (仰韶) culture. They were not alone; as shown in Figure 4.1, there were other independent cultures around, though there was interaction between the different cultures.

Because of this, when the residents of the Yellow River valley migrated east, south, and southeast, they encountered other peoples, cultures, and languages, which influenced the creation of the different Sinitic varieties we find today (cf. Zhou and You 1986; J. Wang 1991). It can be said that the history of China is one of migrations, as there have been so many massive repeated waves of migration throughout its history, due to government policy, war, natural disaster, or the pull of economic opportunity.

These migrations led to different kinds of contact between the people involved and so there were different kinds of influence (substratum, adstratum, superstratum—see LaPolla 2005; 2009 on the mechanism behind these types of influence) or complete language shift.

In all of the current Sinitic varieties we can see stratified remnants of different influences, and recent work in identifying the different strata through internal comparative work and the linking of those strata with historical migrations has led to great

Figure 4.1 "Initial China" (6000 BCE)



Adapted from Chang Kwang-chih (1986).

advancements in our understanding of the history of the varieties. In this paper I will focus on the development of Gan, Hakka, and especially Min, based largely on the work of Jerry Norman and South Coblin (see references below) using natural language data and the traditional comparative method. The implications of their findings are the main point of this paper, pointing out how we have been misled in the past by a problematic methodology and neglect of human history.

3. The Origin of the Southeastern Varieties

Here I will only talk about some of the major migrations and their effects. There were many many migrations of different sizes throughout Chinese history. See LaPolla (2001: 229) for a list of a number of the largest, and for the details see Lee (1978; 1982), Lee and Wong (1991), Zhou (1991), and especially Ge, Wu, and Cao (1997).

3.1 Jiangdong

Roughly 2,500 years ago there was an early southeasterly migration from the Central plains into the Jiangdong (江東; Zhejiang/Jiangsu) area during the Eastern Zhou (東周) dynasty (770–256 BCE). There already were people living in that area, called by the Chinese the Bai Yue (百越), who may have been Austroasiatic-speaking (Norman and Mei 1976; Pulleyblank 1983). This is the area where rice was first cultivated, around 9,000 years ago.

After the fall of the Western Jin (西晉) dynasty in 316 CE, a major change occurred in the area, as up to a million people from the original central plains migrated into the Jiangxi, Zhejiang, and Jiangsu areas, trying to escape the situation in the north, known as the Chaos of the Yongjia period (永嘉之亂), after the fall of the Western Jin dynasty and the migration of large numbers of northern steppes people into the Central Plains. The migrants into the south included the former aristocracy of Jin, plus, as Coblin (2002) points out, a large number of other migrants from Shandong and Northern Jiangsu, as well as Henan, Hebei, Shanxi, and Shaanxi. This migration affected the language spoken in the area, now called the Wu variety area, which will become important when we talk about the formation of the Min varieties.

An even larger second major migration from the north into the southeast of interest to us was caused by the An Lushan (安祿山) Rebellion (安史之亂; mid-8th century) during the Tang (唐) dynasty (618–907 CE). This migration began in the mid-8th century and continued up until the mid-10th century CE. This again led to a change in the area to a more northern type of Sinitic variety in those areas where the northerners settled.

A still larger third major wave of migration of millions of people occurred after the fall of the Northern Song (宋) dynasty in the early 12th century CE that affected much of the south. These migrations will be mentioned in terms of how they affected the southeastern varieties to be discussed below.

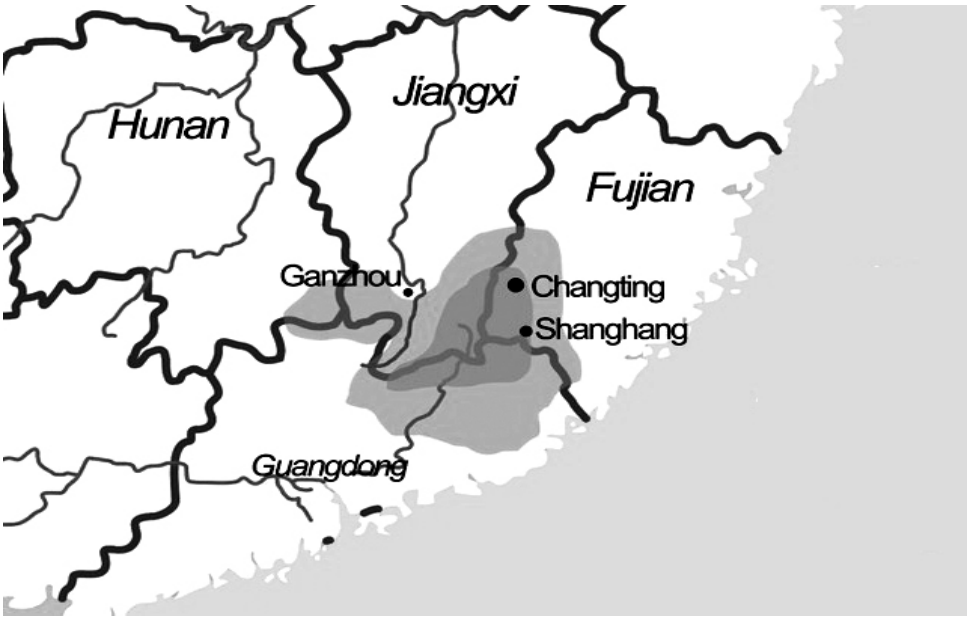
3.2 Gan, Hakka, and She

Yet another migration, this one of specific interest in terms of the development of the Gan (贛) and Hakka (客家) varieties of Sinitic, is the migration of one fifth of the 500,000 troops and settlers the First Emperor (秦始皇) sent to the south-central part of what is now China in the 3rd century BCE. This branch of the army and its followers moved through the Poyang (鄱陽) Lake valley and into the Gan River (贛江) watershed in central and northern Jiangxi and led to the development of the Gan and Hakka varieties of Sinitic (Sagart 2002; Coblin 2015).

A part of that branch of the army and settlers moved further up the Gan River into the South Central Highlands that cover parts of southern Jiangxi, western Fujian, northeastern Guangdong, and west into the southeastern corner of Hunan, and set up garrisons there.

The garrison settlements continued through the Han (漢) period (~200 BCE to 200 CE) and there was a gradual increase in Sinitic speakers moving into the area, particularly of non-military settlers in both the lower and higher areas. Coblin (2015; 2019) calls the variety of Chinese that formed from the coalescence of the northern varieties of Chinese

Figure 4.2 The Hakka heartland (light gray), enclosing the Ancestral She settlement area (dark grey), ca. 1500 CE



Adapted from Map III of Coblin (2019: 394; from Leong 1997: 24, Map 1.2).

brought into the Gan area during that period "Early South Central Chinese".

He posits two subtypes of this Early South Central Chinese, one spoken in the northern lowlands, which became what we now think of as the Gan variety (see Coblin 2015), and one spoken in the southern highlands, which developed into what we think of as the Hakka varieties (see Coblin 2018b; 2019; 2021a; and Map III from Coblin 2019 in Figure 4.2; see also Li 2006 on the history of the Hakka).

There were already non-Sinitic people living in the Highlands, including, as a major part, what have been identified as "Ancestral She" (畲), which Coblin (2019: 383) distinguishes from the modern She ethnic group. We are not sure what their original language was (though Sagart 2002 and Nakanishi 2010 both argue it was a Hmong-Mien (苗瑤) language), but it seems they switched to speaking an early version of South Central Highland Chinese, the language that gave rise to Paleo-Hakka (老客家), Neo-Hakka (新客家), and modern She.

This early South Central Highland variety was already the result of contact between earlier and later settlers, but then migration through the Poyang region and further south up the Gan river increased after the An Lushan Rebellion of the mid-8th century CE and continued through the fall of the Tang dynasty and into the mid-10th century CE (Ge at al. 1997, Vol. 3).

A second major wave of migration from the north into Jiangxi occurred after the fall of the Northern Song dynasty in the early 12th century CE and the push by the Jurchens south (Ge et al. 1997, Vol. 4).

In the ensuing several hundred years there was a blending of the different cultural and linguistic strata (aboriginal, early Central Highland, post An Lushan Rebellion, and post Northern Song collapse) into a single complex Sinitic language variety and culture, which Coblin (2019: 392) calls "New South Central Highlands Chinese".

From the early 16th century CE until the mid-17th century there was economic expansion in the lower areas that attracted migrants from the Highlands. As these Highlanders had their own language and culture, they were seen as strangers, so were called Hakka (Kejia 客家人/客人/客民) 'people from elsewhere' or 'guests'. Those who stayed in the Highlands were not called by this name until modern linguists started doing so.

But with later economic downturns and conflict between the lowland people and those they called Hakka, the latter continued to migrate farther afield, as far as Sichuan (see Hashimoto 1992; Leong 1997).

The She also at around this time, due to conflict with the Sinitic settlers in the Highlands and economic opportunities in the lowlands, started migrating out of the Highlands, some together with what were called the Hakka, some on their own path southeastward into Guangdong and Fujian, and in some cases up the coast into Zhejiang. While they often kept to themselves, they did interact with the Han Chinese and picked up linguistic influences as they did or in some cases fully assimilated.

3.3 Min

Until the end of the Eastern Han dynasty (in 220 CE) there was no appreciable Sinitic population in what is now the Min (閩; Fujian) area. Currently the Min branch manifests many strata (Bielenstein 1959; Norman 1979; 1991), and in fact, as Coblin (2018a, 2021a) and Shen Ruiqing (2021; 2022) argue, based on ideas first put forward by Jerry Norman, it manifests the results of a not-fully completed convergence of three or more unnamable Pre-Min Sinitic varieties that were due to different migration patterns. One stratum is not Sinitic, the language or languages of what were called the Min-Yue (閩越; one of the Bai Yue (百越) 'Hundred Yue', possibly Austro-Asiatic speakers; Norman and Mei 1976; Pulleyblank 1983). There are also several Sinitic strata that can be linked to migrations of different times and from different places.

One is the language of the first Chinese settlers during the latter part of the Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220 CE), who entered the northwestern part of Fujian from southwestern and central Zhejiang (the Jiangdong area, which had been populated by migrants from the areas just north of that area, such as Henan, Shandong, Jiangsu, and Anhui) at the end of the 2nd century CE.

Somewhat later there was migration from Jiangxi in the west into northern Fujian, and the two sets of migrants converged in that area.

A separate migration from the north which began at the end of the 3rd century CE was by sea down from the Wenzhou area along the coast, possibly by Sinicized Yue (越) and/or Ou (甌) people, who were known to be good sailors. Coblin (2021a: 111) summarizes these three migrations in Figure 4.3 (based on Bielenstein 1959).

Figure 4.3 Early migration into Fujian after Bielenstein (1959)

Adapted from Coblin (2019: 111).

Gray line: Migrations from southwestern Zhejiang into Minbei (191–205 A.D.)

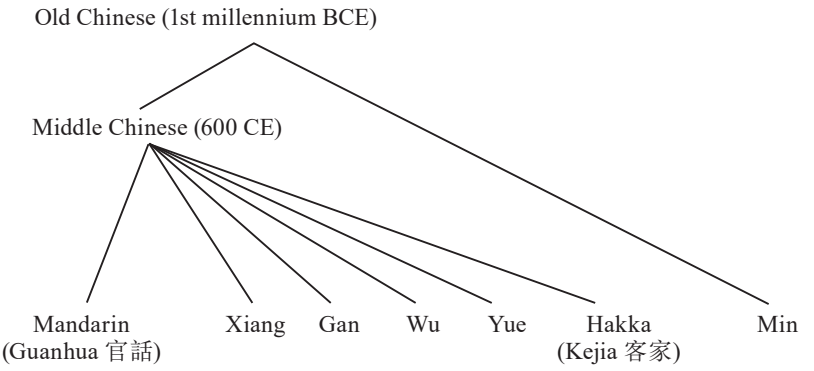
Dark gray line: Migrations from eastern Jiangxi into Far Western Fujian (ca. 260 A.D.)

Light gray line: Coastal Migrations from the Wenzhou area to Mindong (post-280 A.D.)

Coblin (2019: 112ff.) suggests the western and costal migrations developed into two different linguistic varieties (Pre-Min-b and Pre-Min-a, respectively) which later converged around 300 CE to give us Common Min, the initial ancestor of the modern Min varieties, the first language we can call Min, but given the differences between Inland and Coastal Min, and the inability to reconstruct a single Common Min form for many lexical items, he suggests the convergence is not fully complete. See also Shen and Sheng (2022) on how the features that Norman (1983) and Ting (1988) used to argue that Min is a direct descendant of the Wu dialect of the Southern dynasties are only found in Coastal Min. Akitani (2020) also argues that the use of the words we most associate with the Min varieties, such as "許" 'that', "底" 'which', "伊" '3sg pronoun', and "著" 'locational verb', is limited to Coastal Min, and is related to the Southern Dynasties period (420–589 CE) lingua franca. In his most recent work (Akitani 2022), based on innovative terms and their pronunciation, Akitani puts the formation of Proto-Min in the 5th to 6th century CE, even later than Coblin suggested.

There were also large migrations due to the An Lushan Rebellion in the Tang dynasty (post-8th century CE) and a literary form of the Tang koine that affected the language. Fujian was also affected by the migrations after the fall of the Song dynasty in the early 12th century CE. And now there is the influence of Modern Mandarin (Norman 1979; 1983; 1988; 1991; Ting 1988; Mei 2015).

Figure 4.4 Tree model of the Sinitic family



Adapted from Handel (2015: 35).

There are two important conclusions we can make from looking at the history of migrations and language developments in the Min area.

When people write about the different Sinitic varieties, it is common for them to refer to a family tree such as that shown in Figure 4.4.

As the Mǐn branch is not reflected in the 601 CE rhyme book *Qieyun* (《切韻》), it is often assumed that that branch is an earlier split from the rest of Chinese (starting with Karlgren, e.g., Karlgren 1929: 87; see Akitani 2020 for a critical assessment), but it may actually be that the branch had not yet fully formed as a distinct entity and/or simply was not something the writers of the *Qieyun* were aware of or cared about at the time, as the area was not fully integrated into the intellectual life of China at the time, and only became part of mainstream Chinese intellectual life in the Tang dynasty. This may be why when speaking Min people call themselves 'Tang people' (*Tn̂g lâng* 唐儂) instead of 'Han people' (漢人), and call China 'Tang mountain' (*Tn̂g-suann* 唐山). So rather than being the oldest branch, it is one of the newest.[1]

Following Jerry Norman and South Coblin (1995), I want to argue that the tree in Figure 4.4 is unrealistic and ignores the history of the speakers. Norman and Coblin dismiss Karlgren's idea that all of the Sinitic varieties except Min arose out of his philological interpretation of the *Qieyun* rhyme book, and instead work from data of the spoken modern dialects and use the comparative method to reconstruct empirically based earlier stages of the different groups. (For those who want to understand the method, or

1. As mentioned above, the Min varieties developed partially out of migrations from the Jiangdong area, and so retain some archaic features that have changed elsewhere due to later migrations, and this fact has been used to argue that the Min varieties are very old, but that does not follow (see Akitani 2020 for discussion). As mentioned above, the first coalescent variety we can call "Min" did not form until the 4th century CE.

who think Chinese cannot be analyzed using the comparative method, see Coblin 2021.) They also do not see neat family trees coming out of their work.

Biologists now accept the idea that hybridization is not something unusual in evolution and the creation of new species, but is instead a regular feature of evolution, as "combinatorial speciation" or "introgressive hybridization", or "reticulate evolution" (e.g., Veron 1995; Pennisi 2016; Reich 2018), and so instead of neat family trees they use web-like images to represent relationships. In linguistics, languages are also not easily represented by neat trees, as they are more or less the result of coalescence, contact, and influence. I will end with a quote from Coblin (2015: 340) that summarizes the conception: "Our view here is that demographic history suggests waves and flowage, rather than discrete branches which have diverged and developed independently according to a tree-type model."

> [In speaking of the relationship between Gan and Hakka]
> A configuration of this type is not inherently susceptible to absolute demarcations. Nor is it easily characterizable in terms of a distinct set of shared innovations in separate branches of a tree. This is because it was produced by fluid demographic dynamics, rather than by neat, Stammbaum-type bifurcations . . . these families are related by the fact that they have been subject to the same demographic processes, but that they differ in the manners in which they have been influenced by these processes. (Coblin 2015: 340)

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