

The Southern Pinghua Language and its love songs

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Southern Pinghua is a Sinitic language spoken primarily in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China. Southern Pinghua is in contact with speakers of other Sinitic languages, Cantonese and/or Southwestern Mandarin in particular, and also the indigenous Tai languages, known collectively as Zhuang. In this complex contact situation, the Southern Pinghua language and song culture curiously display ‘partitioned’ diffusion patterns: Zhuang, Cantonese and Mandarin each influences a different part of the language and song culture, often with minimal overlap.

The phonology of Southern Pinghua is Zhuang- and Cantonese-like: the number of tones (eight to ten) is amongst the highest within the Sinitic family; the number of onsets is comparatively small, but having a lateral fricative /ɬ/ phoneme is unmistakably a Tai trait; the rimes are relatively conservative, with all the plosive codas (-p -t -k) intact; the syllable structure is (C)(G)V(C) where the glide (G) patterns more with the preceding onset. On the other hand, the syntax and morphology of Southern Pinghua patterns more often with Mandarin, e.g. the gender affixes for animals are prefixed, classifiers in preverbal NPs must be preceded by another noun modifier (i.e. preverbal [CLASSIFIER NOUN] noun phrases—ubiquitous in Cantonese and Zhuang—are absent in Southern Pinghua), and passive construction can be agentless (c.f. Cantonese where the [pei³⁵] passive construction must be agented). Countering claims that syntactic borrowing implies phonological borrowing (e.g. Thomason 2001), in Southern Pinghua the language that has major influence on its grammar, namely Mandarin, has minimal influence on its phonology. In this paper we will explore some of the reasons for this.

The Southern Pinghua folk song culture also shows influence from both the Tai and Sinitic cultures. Folk song cultures are very prominent amongst the various cultures in Guangxi, including Southern Pinghua. The love songs in Southern Pinghua are usually in conversational style, reminiscent of Zhuang singing culture. Each turn is a poem typically consisting of two couplets, with seven syllables in each line, following tonal patterns and parallelisms typical of (Early) Middle Chinese poems. There is a huge repertoire of these love poems, but people also readily improvise during singing sessions. In the past the singing of these songs were rarely passed on from parent to their own child, as these songs were viewed as flirtatious and against Confucian moral codes. In this paper we will introduce the structure and some social aspects of Southern Pinghua love songs.

Bibliography

Thomason, Sarah. 2001. *Language Contact: An Introduction*. Washington DC: Georgetown University Press.