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TYPOLOGICALLY RARE PROPERTIES OF MIÁO LANGUAGES

Matthias Gerner

1. Introduction

The Miáo 苗 languages consist of at least 40 mutually unintelligible languages spoken by 11 million people in a discontinuous area of Southwest China, Northern Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. The term ‘Miáo’ was employed by the Chinese during the Qin dynasty (221–206 BC) to designate non-Chinese groups living in the Yangtze valley south of the Hàn areas. Originally, the term also included ethnic groups that were not the ancestors of the Miáo people but was then gradually narrowed down to the people commonly known as the Miáo people (Figure 3.1).

The Miáo language group combines with the related Yáo languages to form the independent family of Miáo-Yáo languages. Early vanguards included the Miáo-Yáo languages in the Sino-Tibetan language family (Wáng and Máo 1995), but other scholars decided that the reconstruction prompting this inclusion was based on loanword cognates, thereby proposing Miáo-Yáo as an independent family. The Miáo languages are genetically classified as in the following Stammbaum (Figure 3.2) where each terminal node represents a cluster of related though unintelligible languages (Matisoff 2001; Niederer 1998; Ratliffe 2010; Strecker 1987).

The founding myth recounted in legends of the Miáo tribes denotes the loss of an ancient indigenous script that the ancestors lost during forced migration from a ‘cold land in the north’ (Savina 1924). Some variants of the myth predicted the ultimate revitalization of the lost script which Christian missionaries could capitalize upon in the 20th century. For instance, Samuel Pollard translated the New Testament into Ahmao in 1917 by crafting a special alphabetic system, the ‘Pollard Script,’¹ which was welcomed by the natives as an instantiation of the lost script (Enwall 1994). Maurice Hutton of China Inland Mission translated the New Testament into Hmu in 1934 by adapting the Bopomofo script.² The reception of this script, though, was less enthusiastic than the acceptance of the Pollard script. Bopomofo is a phonemic script that the Republication Government originally developed in 1913 for Mandarin Chinese, the new national language. Samples of the Pollard and Hutton scripts are presented in the appendix. In addition to these missionary scripts, investigation teams of the Communist Government devised three Romanised scripts during the ethnic campaign of the 1950s, when the 56 official nationalities were finalized: one script for the Hmu in Guizhōu Province (supplanting

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