Book Review

Holm, David, and Meng Yuanyao. 2015. *Hanvueng: The Goose King and the Ancestral King, an Epic from Guangxi in Southern China*. Zhuang Traditional Texts Series. Leiden: Brill. 641 pp.

Morey, Stephen. 2005. *The Tai Languages of Assam – a Grammar and Texts*. Canberra: Pacific Linguistics 565. 413 pp.

These two volumes have much to contribute both to 'Tai' and to 'Thai' studies: cultural, social, philological, linguistic and beyond. (The spelling 'Tai' is used here to refer to the wider language grouping to which Thai, Lao, etc., belong. Therefore, following this usage, Thai is regarded as one of the Tai languages. So are Lao and Zhuang, although most speakers of these varieties do not normally refer to themselves as 'Tai'.)

The volume by Holm & Meng presents Zhuang data and analysis from the northeastern extent of the Tai grouping, whereas the northwestern extent is represented by languages described in Morey's volume. Both books document results of years of original field research and analysis by highly competent experts. They have valuable bibliographies. They also exhibit advanced competence in specialized computer font development and in achieving attractive and convenient presentation.

Although a unified romanization has been created for Zhuang, the language does not show the same highly standardized features that formal Thai shows. It is rather more a cluster of related varieties that are mutually intelligible to differing degrees. In this sense, the modern Zhuang situation resembles that of the Tai varieties in Assam described by Morey. Another parallel is widespread bilingualism of considerable diachronic depth. Most current Zhuang speakers would also be able to communicate orally in a type of local Chinese speech and would have been schooled in basic written Chinese. Similarly, speakers of Tai varieties in Assam typically know Assamese (related to Bengali) well enough to use it on a daily basis. It should be noted that whereas there are many millions of Zhuang speakers in Guangxi and nearby areas, Tai speakers in Assam are a small and endangered minority. The authors of both studies keep language contact and bilingual characteristics in mind when assessing linguistic matters.

Both studies also challenge the common institutional estrangement of linguistics and philology, a topic to which we return below. The approach followed in each of these two volumes is integrative. Script, orthography and written texts are given close attention, as well as phonological, lexical and grammatical analysis. Both studies are wide-ranging in their view of language, devoting much attention to cultural, historical and social context. Diachronic perspectives are central to the approach of Holm & Meng, who analyze a text from the past, but they are not ignored by Morey, who includes traditional

manuscript materials and considers their archaisms. This inclusive outlook increases the professional significance of both volumes.

Holm & Meng focus their analysis on a traditional Zhuang ritual manuscript. The text is written in traditional character-based Zhuang orthography, comparable to similar character writing in Korea, Vietnam and Japan. The authors distinguish a dozen different modes by which Chinese characters have been modified, recompiled or reinterpreted to represent Zhuang vocabulary. Since much of the text is relatively archaic, the language that the script represents presumably points back to earlier stages of Zhuang and even towards Proto-Tai. The authors present detailed notes on interpretive problems and discuss alternate readings.

While one particular manuscript is selected for concentrated analysis, the authors call attention to the widespread dispersion of similar sources. One aspect of their analysis is textual comparison and transmission history. Another important aspect is functional: intended effects of the text when recited in traditional Zhuang society.

As to format, the original character manuscript is reproduced and transcribed into romanized Zhuang orthography, along with a phonetic transcription. Word-by-word interlinear glosses are given. An English translation is presented that is aesthetically appropriate and a pleasure to read. All lexical material is conveniently indexed.

The Zhuang *Hanvueng* ('goose-king') account presented is a metrical ritual text of about 1500 lines traditionally chanted by ritual specialists: *mogong* or *bouxmo* (compare Thai กู๋ + หมอ). This text relates an epic tale of Tai princely rivalry, with some Chinese resonances. Fraternal struggling persists through many episodes. Readers familiar with Thai and Lao sources will undoubtedly think of analogous narrative material from those chronicle and folklore traditions.

With some local variation, the text would be chanted in situations of serious illness, unnatural death and when family quarreling has deteriorated into hatred, enmity and violence. A demon causing the trouble needs to be exorcised and this is done through recitation of the *Hanvueng* text, along with other rituals.

As the two princely brothers contend with each other throughout the long narrative, many aspects of older Zhuang social and cultural organization come into view, along with landscape and cosmological-religious beliefs. Much of this is discussed in the volume's copious notes and becomes conveniently accessible through its extensive indexical apparatus.

Morey's volume shares many of the social and cultural interests mentioned above but the organization follows general lines of descriptive linguistics. Sections are devoted to phonology, syntax, lexicography, etc. To these are added welcome chapters on writing, literature, and information-technology issues. Examples are presented in local orthography with phonetic transcriptions,

glosses and translations. Four currently-spoken Tai languages are described: Aiton, Phake, Khamti and the severely-endangered Khamyang. In addition, there is some treatment of extinct Ahom and also of Turung, a form of Tibeto-Burman Singpho with a good measure of Tai vocabulary.

The basis of this study is Morey's PhD thesis, completed at Monash University, Melbourne (2002). A CD is included with the published volume, containing a large corpus of texts with transcriptions, translations and annotations. Traditional literature is well-represented. The CD also contains bi-directional dictionaries of Phake and Aiton—a most welcome resource for those engaged in comparative-historical Tai linguistics and in Thai philological lexicography.

An important feature of this work is sustained analysis and documentation focusing on the Ahom and Lik-Tai writing systems. These Indic-based orthographies are similar in some respects to older Tai-Dehong manuscripts and ultimately to Old Mon. They do not mark tone directly and some vocalic distinctions are not distinguished either. To interpret graphic forms correctly, readers need to depend on context. Furthermore, as Morey notes, manuscript symbols and other conventions can vary from scribe to scribe. Certain orthographic forms have a ritual function not directly phonological. All of this constitutes a substantial interpretive challenge that the author handles successfully.

As would be expected in a doctoral dissertation, Morey engages critically with

earlier scholarship on Tai languages of Assam. His insights are opportune and appreciated, since earlier researchers (including the present writer) have overlooked and over-simplified complexities in linguistic data and context. A notable (post-modern?) feature of the author's style is inclusion of detail on consultants' attitudes and viewpoints and on autobiographical background of the data-gathering process.

Taken together, these books set a high standard that hopefully will be approached by future studies on other Tai language varieties. Moreover, they illustrate a recent trend in the organization of humanistic studies. Over many decades, what I see as an unfortunate direction in academic and institutional policy has advocated the break-up of language disciplines into three:

- (i) 'philology', treating orthographic, etymological, ethnographic, and literary topics;
- (ii) 'linguistics', with a primarily cognitive or synchronic-typological focus;
- (iii) 'applied linguistics', with focus on language-learning, media, etc.

The former 'philological' studies have usually been done in language, cultural-studies, anthropology or even history departments, whereas the latter two 'linguistic' subjects have been pursued in departments dedicated to linguistics. But how far is this division justified? The recent trend, seen in several leading professional journals, is to question this separate disciplinary arrangement. The two volumes

reviewed are excellent representatives of new integrative syntheses appropriate for investigating human language in its humanistic context.

Reviewed by
Anthony Diller
Honorary Associate
Department of Linguistics
University of Sydney