The Chinese-based Writing System of the Zhuang Language

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1. Introduction

Generally speaking, scholars of Tai languages do not usually associate the transcription of Tai languages with the logographic Chinese characters, because the majority of Tai languages have typically been written with their own alphabetic writing systems. After coming under the historical influence of Indian civilization in Southeast Asia, the Thai, Lao, and Shan languages, for example, each developed their own alphabetic orthographies which are derived from the Brahmi script (Court 1996:444). The Thai alphabet of Thailand dates from the late 13th century (Diller 1996:458).

On the other hand, various languages of East Asia have been profoundly influenced by the written Chinese language and historically adopted the Chinese characters as their writing system. Such languages as Japanese, Vietnamese, and Korean which are not genetically related to Chinese are three of the well-known, so-called Sino-Xenic languages which are or have been written with the Chinese characters. In the process of adapting the Chinese characters to the transcription of these languages, literate speakers were able to exploit the principles of Chinese-character formation (which are listed and described below) for the creation of their own unique characters, e.g. the kokūji 国字 of Japanese, the chūnōm in Vietnamese, and the kukja 쿠자 in Korean. Therefore, from the linguistic, historical, geographical, and sociocultural perspectives, Zhuang, a northern Tai language spoken in the Guangxi Autonomous Region of southern China, presents a particularly interesting case of a Tai language which has been written with standard Chinese characters and non-standard but Chinese-like — i.e. uniquely-Zhuang — characters (Zhuang has not been the only Tai language with this kind of writing system, either now or in the past; Prof. Wu Wenyi, vice-director of the Guizhou Province Nationalities Research Institute, in a personal communication in July 1998 to the author stated that the Buyi language is being written with Chinese characters and uniquely Buyi characters). In the Zhuang language the Zhuang characters are called [sau̯l wuŋ6], [sau̯l dip7], or [sau̯l taw6] (Wei, Tan 1980:97) [throughout this paper the phonemic transcription of Zhuang words is enclosed within square brackets, and the number following the syllable indicates the tone

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category]; although Zhuang writing borrows standard Chinese characters to represent Zhuang words, it has also created uniquely Zhuang characters by borrowing components from standard Chinese characters and then recombining them as semantic and phonetic elements. Zhuang writing pushed the principles of character formation to the extreme, however, so that the number of these indigenous Zhuang characters constituted the larger proportion of graphic units in relation to the regular Chinese characters (cf. the discussion of the so-called demotic characters used in Vietnamese by Nguyen 1997:7). Interestingly, a literate Chinese speaker who does not know how to speak or read Zhuang language may still be able to guess the pronunciation of many and the meanings of a few Zhuang characters.

Of the 55 ethnic groups officially recognized by the Chinese government, the Zhuang are the second largest population after the majority Han Chinese and number a little over 13 million according to 1982 figures (Ramsey 1987:165). The Zhuang people are concentrated mainly in the Guangxi Autonomous Region of southern China but are also found in eastern Yunnan and western Guangdong Provinces. The Zhuang people have referred to themselves by a number of different ethnonyms, e.g., [pou4 tsuŋ6, pou4 cwn6, pu4 jai4, pu4 noŋ2, bu6 dai2, pho6 thai2, kum2 tho3, pu4 to3, pou4 man2, pou4 ban3, pou4 lau2]; today the officially-designated Zhuang name for the Zhuang people is [pou4 cwn6] (Wei, Tan 1980:1). According to Ramsey (1987:235), there was a time when the Zhuang people denied their Zhuang ethnicity and insisted they were ethnic Chinese. This attitude of self-denigration was the result of the racial prejudice that the majority Han Chinese population has traditionally felt toward the Zhuang (as well as to other non-Han ethnic groups).

2. Sources for the study of the Zhuang writing system

The present study of the Chinese-based Zhuang writing system is based primarily upon two sources. The first is an article written by 張元生 Zhang Yuansheng and entitled 壯族人民的文化遺產 — 方快壯字 [the cultural legacy of the Zhuang people — the square Zhuang characters] which was published in a volume of papers concerned with research on the ancient writing systems of China's minority languages; this volume is entitled <<中國民族古文字研究 >> [research on the ancient writing of the nationalities of China] and was edited by the 中國民族古文研究會 [research group on the ancient writing of the nationalities of China]. In this article Zhang has listed 1,008 Zhuang characters which have been in use in the Wuming area of Guangxi along with their pronunciations according to the Wuming dialect and their equivalent meanings in standard Chinese. Also listed are about 100 Zhuang characters whose meanings and pronunciations have not been determined.
The second main source on the Zhuang writing system is the "[ancient Zhuang-character dictionary] and published by the [leadership group with the program for arranging the publication of ancient books of ethnic minorities of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region], 南 宁 : 廣 西 民 族 出 版 社 [Nanning: Guangxi Nationalities Press] (in the following citations of references for which the dictionary is the source it is abbreviated as GZZZD). This dictionary which was published in 1989 has made an invaluable contribution to our research of the Zhuang characters by listing and defining about 10,700 Zhuang characters which have been in popular use in areas inhabited by the Zhuang people. This dictionary has tried to reflect how Zhuang characters have been used by speakers of various Zhuang dialects and so is not based on any one particular geographical area. In a personal communication of July 1998 by Mrs. Margaret E. Milliken who has been teaching in the Guangxi Zhuang Language School in Wuming, the Zhuang dictionary has been helping to revive and encourage the use of Zhuang writing among the Zhuang people.

In its introduction the Zhuang dictionary has stated that the earliest attested text of Zhuang characters is an inscription on a stone tablet that is dated 682 AD during the early Tang Dynasty (GZZZD 1989:5). According to this introduction, the Zhuang writing system has been used for the transcription of a wide range of literary materials, including folk myths and fairytales, stories, legends, folk songs, proverbs, play scripts, fables, couplets on walls, stele inscriptions, medical prescriptions, family genealogies, contracts, etc. (GZZZD 1989:1). Holm (1998) has analyzed and interpreted a ritual text written by Zhuang-speaking vernacular priests; his description of this task gives some indication of the complex nature of Zhuang writing. According to Wei and Tan (1980:97), Daoist priests wrote classical texts in Zhuang characters and business people used them for keeping accounts. After the 1949 liberation of China, revolutionary folk songs and communist party propaganda were transcribed in Zhuang characters in the revolutionary guerrilla areas of Guangxi.

Because the Chinese-based writing system of Zhuang has never been standardized, the usage of Zhuang characters seems to have varied considerably from one area to another; indeed, the same word has been written with two or more different characters. In perusing the dictionary, we observe that one morphosyllable may have a half-dozen or even more variant forms or allographs associated with it. The proliferation of variant graphs obviously made the writing system very complicated and placed a heavy burden on the memories of the people who used it; this situation apparently reached the point where it was so unwieldy that some people (Chinese linguists among them) felt it was better to abandon the system altogether and replace it with romanization. At any rate, the Zhuang characters were not adopted for use in official documents or in standard education (Wei, Tan
2.1 Principles underlying the creation of Zhuang characters

The Chinese-character-based writing system of Zhuang has used both Chinese characters and specially-created Zhuang characters whose composition was based on principles that are similar or even identical to those that underlie the formation of the standard Chinese characters. Our study of Zhuang graphs reveals four or five main principles from the traditional study of the graphic structure and usage of the Chinese characters that also underlie the structure and usage of the Zhuang graphs. These traditional principles of formation and usage of the Chinese characters are listed below in Table 1 (English translations of the Chinese terms are based on Boltz 1996:197; for the convenience of the reader who is not literate in standard Chinese, the phonemic transcription of the Mandarin pronunciation of the Chinese characters is enclosed within square brackets, and the diacritics over the vowels as in ā, á, ě, à indicate the level, rising, dipping, and falling tone contours of Mandarin, respectively):

Table 1. Traditional principles of formation and usage of the Chinese characters.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) 象形字 [ciàng cíg tā]</td>
<td>'representing the form': the graph resembles the object it is intended to represent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) 指事字 [tsì sī tā]</td>
<td>'indicating the matter': the graph attempts to represent the idea of the word.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) 會意字 [xuéi i tā]</td>
<td>'conjoining the sense': the graph combines two other graphs whose meanings together equal the meaning of the intended graph.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) 形聲字 [cíg sānɡ tā]</td>
<td>'forming the sound': the graph combines a phonetic component which indicates the graph's pronunciation and a semantic component which bears some relationship to the graph's meaning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) 假借字 [cià tāi tā]</td>
<td>'false borrowing': a standard graph is borrowed for its homophonous or nearly homophonic pronunciation to write another word.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Altogether there were actually six traditional principles, i.e., the so-called 六書 [liú shū] 'six (classes of) scripts', which were first recognized by 許慎 [cū shèn] Xu Shen, the author of the dictionary <<説文解字 >> [suō wén tōi tā] (explaining the characters) from the first century A.D. Although most of these principles still apply to the structure of the Chinese characters today, we should note that the vast majority of Chinese characters have followed the fourth principle of 形聲 (the alternate term 諧聲 cíé sānɡ 'harmonizing the sound' is also sometimes