

The Zhongxian (中仙) Min Dialect: A Preliminary Study of Language Contact and Stratum-Formation

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Previous studies on the historical strata of the Min dialects mostly focused on the sub-stratum of the languages and their relations with the Wu dialects. There are two views that are generally accepted: 1) the aboriginal population of the Min area was the Min-Yue people, whose language formed the Min substratum; 2) the Min dialects and the ancient Wu dialects are closely connected. Some Wu dialect elements have been retained in the Min language and formed another layer. In this paper, I will discuss these two layers in the Zhongxian subdialect of Min, and will provide examples from those two strata. The paper will also discuss a more recent stratum that is in the process of formation that is the result of influence from the official language, Putonghua.

0. Introduction

Zhongxian is a small town located in the south of Youxi county (尤溪县) in Fujian Province; generically, the dialect is listed under the category of Min-Dong qu (闽东区) Hou-guan pian (侯官片) dialect group, according to the “language atlas of China.” In addition to the Zhongxian dialect, there are some other local dialects in the Youxi county that have a remarkably low degree of mutual intelligibility, including the Chengguan dialect (城关话), which is used in the middle of the Youxi county, and the Yangzhong dialect (洋中话), which is spoken in the north-east of the county.

As a small branch of the Min dialect, the Zhongxian dialect, to the best of my knowledge, has not been studied previously. The dialect data used in this paper is from my own fieldwork conducted in 2006, which reflects the rather recent phonology of the Zhongxian dialect. Due to influence of the promotion of Putonghua, the Zhongxian dialect is undergoing some phonological changes, which is best reflected by the newly formed layer in this language. To examine and sort out this new layer is certainly helpful to gain a better understanding of the language, as well as of the bigger picture of the Min dialect in general. Before discussing this new layer, I will first examine two older strata, the Yue substratum and the Wu stratum, with references to historical migration movements and language contact in the following sections.

1. The Aboriginal Min Language

To study this language, we need to trace back to the language spoken by the aboriginal inhabitants in the Min area, what is today Fujian Province, which were the Min-Yue 闽越 people. Min-Yue was a branch of the Yue 越 people, which is also called

Baiyue 百越 because of the many varieties of the Yue tribes, including Wu-Yue (吴越) and Min-Yue (闽越). The Min-Yue people lived in the Min area until the Qin-Han period. In 110 B.C., the armies of Han Wu Di 汉武帝 invaded the territory of the Min-Yue and defeated them. As a result, they were removed from Min into the Jianghuai 江淮 area. However, it is believed that those who were removed from the area were the upper classes and some of the armies, while the local people remained in Min. Therefore, the Min-Yue 闽越 language was still the main local language, the aboriginal language of Min that forms the deepest stratum of the modern Min dialects.

To study this aboriginal stratum in the modern Min dialects, the current approach is mainly lexicon-based. As Norman (1991) explains: “in the case of the Min dialects, it is hard to identify any common phonetic feature distinguishing them from other Chinese dialect groups which might be attributed to substratum influence. Even if there were, we know so little about the ancient Yue language that it would be virtually impossible to show that the trait in question could actually be traced back to a Yue substratum. As regards the lexicon, we are somewhat more fortunate.”

Norman and Mei (1976) propose that the language of the ancient Yue people was Austroasiatic, related in a particularly close fashion to Vietnamese. Assuming that the language of the Min-Yue was of the same linguistic affiliation as that of the other Yue tribes, they approach this issue by discovering colloquial words that correspond to Vietnamese words. One of the words that they cited is given here in (1a). In the Zhongxian (Min) dialect, the word for “wet, moist” is pronounced as [taŋ], as shown in (1b). The consistency is obvious here.

- (1) a. “wet, moist” *dəm in Proto-Min
 [dam] in Vietnamese
 b. “wet, moist” [taŋ] in Zhongxian (Min)

However, a different perspective, while it is also lexicon-based, is taken by other scholars. To be specific, they take efforts in discovering colloquial words that might not have written forms, but have cognates in the Zhuangdong language 壮侗语, which is considered the descendent of the ancient Yue language. The results are fruitful. Many such cognates have been found. The following are some examples from Li Rulong (2005):

- (2) a. ‘to suck’
 Min dialects: Zhongxian 中仙 sɔ Fuzhou 福州 sɔʔ Xiamen 厦门 suʔ
 Dongyu 侗语: sot
 Taiyu 泰语 : su:t

- b. ‘to hide’
 Min dialects: Zhongxian 中仙 me
 Taiyu 泰语 : Yuanyang 元阳 mɛp
- c. ‘to fall off’
 Min dialects: Zhongxian 中仙 lɛʔ Xiamen 厦门 lut
 Zhuangyu 壮语: Longzhu 龙州 lu:t
 Taiyu 泰语 : Xishuangbanna 西双版纳 lut
- d. ‘foot’ (骹)
 Min dialects: Zhongxian 中仙 kha Xiamen 厦门 lut
 Zhuangyu 壮语: ka, kha
- e. ‘stupid’
 Min dialects: Zhongxian 中仙 ŋɔŋ Xiamen 厦门 ɣɔŋ
 Daiyu 傣语: ŋɔŋ
 Liyu 黎语: ŋaŋ

Li Rulong 李如龙 (2005) points out that there are some “core words” that seem to be genuine Chinese because they exist in Chinese rhyme books as well as in dictionaries. However, Chinese is not the etymon of these words, which have been written down in Chinese characters. The etymon stems from some minority people’s languages in the south. The character [nong] 侬 is one of these examples. The character means “people”, and also indicates “oneself.” It is still used in modern Min dialects. Take Zhongxian dialect for example:

- (3) a. ‘people’ (侬)
 Zhongxian 中仙: noŋ
- b. Zhongxian 中仙: noŋ kɛʔ tsɿ ʔe k’ə
 人 自 己 会 去。
 ‘I/they can go by myself/themselves.’

Nong 侬 is very much like *renjia* 人家 in Mandarin, in a sense that it can refer to both other people and oneself.

Pan Wuyun 潘悟云 and Chen Zhongmin 陈忠敏 (1995) state the *nong* 侬 is a dialectal word that was widespread in usage in Jiangnan 江南 area in earlier times. The article suggests that the *nong* 侬 is probably a word from the Baiyue vocabulary. It is used to refer to oneself or one’s tribe. While the Baiyue people adopted the Chinese language,

they retained this word from their native lexicon. Because the Baiyue people generally lived in the south of China, this also explains why *nong* 侬 is not specifically found in Min dialects, but in some other dialects as well, such as the Wu 吴 and Gan 赣 dialects of Chinese.

Another special character is *jian* 囡. This character is collected in the *Jiyun* 集韵 rhyme book. It means “son.” Its pronunciation in the Zhongxian dialect is [kuŋ]. As with *er* 儿 in Mandarin, 囡 is also grammaticalized and used as a suffix, such as 刀囡 ‘knife’, 钳囡 ‘pliers’. Li (2005) points out that it is hard to imagine words of such importance that, while they are not found in any ancient Chinese records, surface so abruptly in the Min dialects and was used so widely. The most plausible explanation is that this word was borrowed from the old Baiyue language.

It is almost unquestionable that there is a substratum of the Min-Yue in the Min dialects. However, it is extremely difficult to tell how much of that stratum is left in the modern language, mainly because the primary method to study it today is lexicon-based. In other words, the results are relatively fragmented. We do not observe any phonological or grammatical features from that stratum, which would be much more convincing.

2. The Wu Stratum

Scholars (e.g. Wang 1999, Chen 2002, Ting 2006) have shown that the Wu dialects and Min dialects are closely related, and some have even proposed that the Min dialects are the descendents of the ancient Wu dialects. For example, Wang Futang 王福堂 (1999:69) proposes, “based on common characteristics between the Wu and Min dialects, it is reasonable to draw the conclusion that the modern Min dialects are from the ancient Wu dialects.”¹

This proposal is, first of all, supported by the historical migration movements. The earliest Chinese migration into the Min area found in written records took place in the Three Kingdoms Period (Sanguo 三国 period, 202B.C.-280 A.D.). As Sunwu 孙吴, the political leader of the Wu kingdom, developed the Jiangdong 江东 area², people from there started to move south, into the region north of the Min area. These people are believed to speak the ancient Wu language.

Another major Chinese migration movement took place after the upheavals in the Jin 晋 dynasty (265 A.D.-420 A.D.). Due to the wars in the Zhongyuan 中原 area ‘Central Plains’, mainly today’s Henan province, a large number of people fled from home and moved southwards. Some went to the Jiangdong area where it was populous and well-

¹ The original words are: “从目前吴闽两方言的重要共同点引出现代闽方言是中古吴语继承者的结论，是言之成理的说法。”

² In modern China it is mainly the region of the north of Zhejiang province 浙江省 and the south of Jiangsu province 江苏省.

developed. As this resulted in conflicts with the local population, they continued to move south and into the Min area. For example, the upheavals of Yongjia period 永嘉之乱 in 311 A.D. resulted in major migration into the Min region. According to *Sanshanzhi* 三山志, the chaos triggered the move of the “Eight Surnames” groups into Min.³ As more Chinese people moved into the area, more administrative districts were established, such as Jin’an county 晋安郡, what is now present-day Fuzhou 福州, Liang’an county 梁安郡, what is present-day Nan’an 南安, Yian county 义安郡, and the present-day Chaozhou 潮州.⁴

As we can see, the majority of the Chinese migration is from the direction of Jiangzhe 江浙, which refers to today’s Jiangsu province 江苏省 and Zhejiang province 浙江省. Although some are originally from the Zhongyuan area, it is reasonable to think that their language must have absorbed some Wu language elements to various extents when they were in the ancient Wu language area. Therefore, it is very likely that, during the formation of the Min language of earlier times, the ancient Wu language played a role, and it is expected that there would exist a Wu stratum in the Min dialects.

The connection between the Wu and Min dialects can be corroborated in various linguistic aspects. First of all, from a phonological point of view, there is evidence that can be used to show such a connection. For example, the retention of bilabials and the lack of retroflex stops are two major characteristics of the Min dialects. Previous studies have found that this is not exclusive to Min, but is also the case for some of the Wu dialects. We may take a look at the following examples:

(4) a.	斧	肥	反	
	fǔ ‘ax’	fēi ‘fat’	fǎn ‘to turn over’	
	江山 (Wu)	pu	bi	pa
	中仙 (Min)	pə	puɪ	paŋ
	厦门 (Min)	pɔ	pui	pu
b.	猪	帐	竹	
	zhū ‘pig’	zhàng ‘tent’	zhú ‘bamboo’	
	丽水 (Wu)	ti	tiaŋ	tioʔ
	江山 (Wu)	tɔ	tia	taʔ
	中仙 (Min)	tə	tiaŋ	tiʔ

³ The original quotation is “永嘉之乱，衣冠南渡，入闽者八族。”

⁴ Wangfutang 王福堂, 1999:70.

As we can see from the above examples, in some Wu dialects, bilabials are retained as well, and the Zhi 知 series of initials is not separated from the Duan 端 series of initials. A plausible explanation for this phenomenon is that the retention of bilabials and the lack of retroflex stops were featured of ancient Wu dialects as well. Due to the influences from the northern dialects, these features were lost in most Wu dialects, and only kept in some areas. Also, during the formation of the Min dialects, these features were brought to the local area by the immigrants in history. Because of the strong and consistent resistance against outer language influences, in part due to the relative geographical isolation of the region, the Min dialects managed to retain these features.

The phonological connection between the Wu and Min dialects can be illustrated in other, more detailed, ways as well. Chen Zhongmin 陈忠敏 (2002), for example, studies the corresponding layers of the *Yu* 虞 rhyme in Min and Wu dialects, and finds that there are three layers of the *Yu* 虞 rhyme in both Min and Wu dialects. Moreover, the layers in the Min dialects correspond with that in the Wu dialects. He uses Fuzhou 福州 and Xiamen 厦门 as representatives for the Min dialects, and Kaihua 开化 for the Wu dialects. The result is as follows:

(5)	开化 (Wu)	福州 (Min)	厦门 (Min)
Layer I	iu	ieu	iu
Layer II	u:ə,y:ə	uɔ	ɔ
Layer III	u,y	u,y	u

The first and second layers are colloquial readings. The example words for them are respectively *xu* 须, *shu* 树 and *zhu* 珠(目~) for the first layer and *fu* 斧, *zhu* 朱, *shu* 输 and *yu* 芋 for the second layer. The third layer is literary reading, with *zhu* 主, *chu* 厨 and *shu* 书 being its example words.

Also, I found in the Zhongxian dialect there are two layers of reading of the word *yǐ* 蚁 which correspond with those in the Wenzhou 温州 dialect.

(6)	蚁 ‘ant’	中仙	温州
	literary reading	ŋi	ŋi
	colloquial reading	ŋia	ŋa

Similar to Chen’s example, the consistency in both colloquial and literary readings of *yǐ* 蚁 in the two dialects serves as persuasive evidence. This example can not only be interpreted from a phonological point of view, but also from a lexical point of view, because *yǐ* 蚁 is a colloquial word in daily life. For two dialects unrelated, the word can totally have different forms of pronunciations. The consistency in the two dialects only shows there is some kind of affiliation between the two languages.

Lexicon is applied as favorable evidence in proving affiliations between languages. Colloquial words of the spoken language in daily life are a peculiar group of it for the reason that they are the most resistant to the loan words. As a result, they are most likely to keep and reflect the original readings of the word. Ting Pang-hsin 丁邦新 (2006) provides a few of such words that could prove the close relationship between the Wu and Min dialects. The Zhongxian dialect can be incorporated into the examples, as has been done here in (7) below.

- (7) a. ‘evening’ Zhongxian: maŋ 冥 Xiamen: am mi 暗暝
 Source: 吴歌《读曲歌》：愿得连冥不复曙
- b. ‘you’ Zhongxian: nə 汝 Fuzhou: ny 汝
 Source: 吴歌《子夜歌》：语笑问汝道，腹中阴忆汝

The above Wu folk songs are from the Nanbei dynasties 南北朝 (386A.D.-589A.D.). Interestingly, none of these words have corresponding spoken forms found in any modern Wu dialects, even though the written records show their existence in the history of the Wu dialects. These words are, nevertheless, retained in modern Min dialects, including in the Zhongxian dialect. The explanation to the existence of these words in both ancient Wu dialects and in modern Min dialects is that ancient Wu and Min dialects were closely affiliated.

Li Rulong (2002) also finds examples of this sort. One of the words is:

- (8) ‘sleeve’ Zhongxian: tɕ’iu ɸuŋ 手□ Xiamen: tɕ’iu ŋ 手□
 Source: 《方言》：“褯□谓之袖。”
 郭注：“衣褯音橘，江东呼□，音婉。”

In modern Min dialects, the word for ‘sleeve’ is 手□, whose pronunciation vary from place to place. It is [tɕ’iu uoŋ] in Fuzhou, [tɕ’iu ŋ] in Xiamen, and [tɕ’iu ɸuŋ] in the Zhongxian dialect. According to Guopu’s 郭璞 annotation to *Fangyan* 方言, the word for ‘sleeve’ in Jiangdong is pronounced the same as the word *wan* 婉. The word, along with its pronunciation, is used in the Min dialects, as shown in (8). Similarly, the corresponding spoken form is not found in any modern Wu dialect. However, the written records show unquestioning existence of the word in the ancient Wu dialect. Again, this provides strong evidence for the historical connection between the Wu and Min dialects.

3. Putonghua Influences

Promotion of Putonghua has been the language policy of the Chinese government for the past decades, and nowadays Putonghua has established its dominance over other varieties of the Chinese language in China, and has impacted all these other varieties, or dialects. As Norman (1991) proposed, “All over China at the present time regional dialects are undergoing immense changes under the pressure of the newly established standard language (Putonghua). This change is very often reflected in surprisingly great differences between the language of different generations in a single locality.”

In the case of the Zhongxian dialect, while it might be too hasty to say a new Putonghua layer has formed, the phenomenon described by Norman is indeed taking place. A substantial proof that I find is the emergence of the labiodental initial [f].

One should note that while the labiodental initial [f] has separated from bilabial [p] in most dialects in China, this sound change did not take place in the Min dialects. According to the *Hanyu Fangyin Zihui* 汉语方音字汇, the [f] sound is not recorded in either Fuzhou 福州 or Xiamen 厦门 dialects, which are regarded as representatives for the Min dialects, nor in Jian’ou 建瓯 and Chaozhou 潮州 dialects. However, I find this initial through my research and fieldwork on the phonology of Zhongxian dialect. Take the word *fen* 分 ‘divide’ for example. There are three layers, as shown in (9), with the word *fenkai* ‘to separate’ given in Pinyin Romanization and Zhongxian broad phonetic transcription:

(9)		Zhongxian		Putonghua	Zhongxian
First layer:	分	[puŋ]	分开	fen kai	[puŋ k’uɪ]
Second layer:	分	[xuŋ]	分开	fen kai	[xuŋ k’uɪ]
Third layer:	分	[fuŋ]	分开	fen kai	[fuŋ k’uɪ]

The bilabial [p] can be traced back to the Wu stratum, as has already been explained above. The [x] sound in the second layer is a lenition of the bilabial, which only takes place when the segment occurs before back vowels, such as [u] or [o]. It is important to note that [p] initial words in the first layer are not only older than those in the second layer, but that [p] initial words also occur more frequently in colloquial contexts. Therefore, the such words in the [p] initial should be counted as *baidu* 白读, or colloquial reading, and the second layer is *wendu* 文读, literary reading. Both of these layers exist for all Zhongxian dialect native speakers. As for the third layer [f], it is only used by the younger generation. The definition of younger generation here is those people who went to school and studied Putonghua. Therefore, it is safe to say that this additional pronunciation by the younger generation is due to the influence of Putonghua.

It is certain that nowadays as more and more people are going to school and study the standard language Putonghua, it is to be expected that there will be much more infiltration of Putonghua into the Zhongxian dialect. It is important to keep track of this

development, particularly because we can record the spoken forms of both varieties, Putonghua and the Zhongxian dialect, to chart on-going changes across generations over time.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study of the historical strata of a language helps to sort out the development of a language in different periods of time, as well as its relationship to other languages. As we can see in the case of the Zhongxian dialect, language contact has been the primary reason for the formation of different strata in the language. This study provides a preliminary study of the historical strata in the Zhongxian dialect. Lexicon and phonology are the two major means that can be applied to examine strata formation, studied in conjunction with migration history and other historical sources. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the Zhongxian dialect and its historical development to the present day, as well as the Min dialects in general, more comprehensive data need to be obtained and more in-depth analysis need to be conducted.

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