

20 *Three Tibeto-Burman languages of Vietnam*

JEROLD A. EDMONDSON

1 Introducing the Tibeto-Burman peoples of Vietnam

In this modest study to honor our esteemed colleague, Dr. James A. Matisoff, I will be focusing on three Tibeto-Burman (TB) languages of Vietnam referred to in Vietnamese language sources as: Phù Lá, Xá Phó, and Lô Lô.¹ The most important contribution this essay makes, I feel, is to present **reliable data** for these languages. To the best of my knowledge there is very little published about any of these much beyond general information such as their names, approximate locations, and some reports of their customs and practices, cf. Lajonquière 1906, Abadie, 1924, DEMG 1975, Lục and Nồng 1975, 1995, Nguyễn 1975, EMPV 1978, Hemmet 1995 and Mai 1995, 1998. To aid in making linguistic data widely available, I have compiled as a companion piece to this paper a comparative word list of about 500 lexical items including the data elicited during my fieldwork sessions on these three as well as four other Tibeto-Burman languages of

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Vietnam that can be accessed on my Web Site [//ling.uta.edu/~jerry/](http://ling.uta.edu/~jerry/). One other contribution I hope to make is to present **current information** about the locations, distribution, populations, and linguistic situation of these groups. All of them have small speaker numbers and inhabit areas of the country very near the China border. As their old people tell it, they immigrated to these places at some time in the near or remote past to escape harsh physical conditions or political turmoil and now live in small numbers in Vietnam. For some of these cases we have concrete evidence in support of their immigrant origins from very closely related groups in China who live nearby. Much about their history, culture, and languages remains unclear though and deserves further study, Nguyễn 1975 and Mai 1995, 1998. A third point I wish to make concerns the **position of these groups** within the larger spectrum of Lolo-Burmese languages, which is the subgroup of Tibeto-Burman to which all of them belong.² In pursuing these points I will provide some general information about each of these languages and then note some of their distinctive features.

It is useful to mention that the policy characterising relations between the majority society and small people groups within Vietnam has followed the practices of the Soviets and the Chinese. That is to say, selected groups are granted official recognition with certain rights and privileges; such decisions are often based on historical, cultural, linguistic, and political considerations. As a result, people groups, cultures, and languages do not completely overlap with such officially recognised minorities. So, for example, the TB peoples of Vietnam discussed here are classified into the official nationalities: Phù Lá and Lô Lô. From our own data as well as information gathered from Vietnamese sources, however, it is evident that there exists a greater number of language groups than official ethnicities: Lô Lô has two language groups (one discussed here) and Phù Lá also has at least two groups (both discussed here).

2 The Phù Lá nationality

The population of the Phù Lá was determined to be 6,424 in the last official census (April 1, 1989). People of the Phù Lá nationality live mostly in Lào Cai Province and are divided into several different subgroups but treated as one nationality (cf. Map). So, for example, EMPV 1978 distinguished six separate subgroups: (1) the Phù Lá Hán, Phu Kha, or China Phù Lá living at Bắc Hà District at Lũng Phình Commune and Tả Chu Phùng of Mường Khương District, Lào Cai Province, (2) the Phù Lá Lão or Xá Phó living on the southwest bank of the Red River in Sa Pa District and in Lai Châu Province to the west, (3) the Phù Lá Đen or Black Phù Lá living Bát Xát District in A Lù Commune and in Nàn Xi of Xín Mần District, Hà Giang Province, (4) the Phù Lá Hoa or Flowery Phù Lá also living in Bát Xát District in A Lù Commune and also some living with the Xá Phó of Bảo Thắng

² See Matisoff (1988) for a discussion of this choice of name.

District, Lào Cai, (5) Chù Lá Phù Lá in Lùng Phình of Bắc Hà District, Lào Cai, and (6) the Phù Lá Trắng or White Phù Lá living in Mường Khương District, Lào Cai Province. Twenty years later the description of these peoples and their linguistic and cultural situation had changed considerably. Mai (1995:63) states that in the early 1980's the Phù Lá Đen and the Phù Lá Hoa of Bát Xát District of A Lù Commune returned to China where they once lived and, moreover, the Ph^h Læ Trắng and Chù Lá Phù Lá were now regarded as belonging to the Phù Lá Hán subgroup. Thus, Vietnamese sources say there are today only two linguistic groups living in Vietnam, the Phù Lá Hán to the north and east of the Red River and the Phù Lá Lăo to the south and west of the Red River. Moreover, our informant, an official who was familiar with the linguistic situation in many Phù Lá villages, reported that language shift is highly advanced in many places; younger speakers of Phù Lá are opting to speak other regional languages and Vietnamese, so there is some urgency in getting more information on these groups quickly while there are still some completely fluent speakers available. In this paper we will report on the Phu Kha or Phu Khla language of Bảo Yên District, Lào Cai and also on the Xá Phó or Laghuu language of Sa Pa District, Lào Cai, which are quite different in phonology and lexicon and are certainly not comprehensible in running conversation.

Finally, it is worth noting that there are pictures of the Yi of Yunnan Province in traditional dress on the Web Site [//travel.yn.cninfo.net/nyminfq/minzu26/yizu/yizu-e.htm/](http://travel.yn.cninfo.net/nyminfq/minzu26/yizu/yizu-e.htm/). Picture 28 entitled 'Yi of Wenshan Prefecture' shows women wearing clothing identical to the Phu Kha of Vietnam. That further confirms the presence of peoples north of the border likely to be culturally and linguistically close to the Phu Kha.

3 Phù Lá Hán or Phu Kha Language

This subgroup of the Phù Lá call themselves /p^{hu}³¹ k^{ha}³³/ or /p^{hu}³¹ k^h⁴^a³³/ and are often called Phù Lá Hán by neighboring groups. They are said to have arrived in Vietnam in two waves, the first in the 15th century and a later one in the 18th century. The fact that some of the Phù Lá nationality has returned to China recently suggests that there still exist closely related groups north of the border. We were not told, however, that members of this group regularly visit China in search of spouses or to pay visits to relatives or to honor ancestors even though some of these people live very close to the Sino-Vietnamese border. Many Phu Kha speakers know a form of Guanhua (Southwestern Mandarin) Chinese and it is not surprising that we detected a number of modern Chinese loanwords in their lexicon.

As far as what the autonym /p^{hu}³¹ k^{ha}³³/ can tell us, we note that the designation [p^{hu}³¹] 'people' is a very common one for TB groups, especially those belonging to the Eastern Yi nationality in Yunnan. Some autonyms of groups in China are: /p^{hu}²¹/, /p^{ho}²¹/, /t^h⁴^u²¹ la²¹ ba²¹/, /p^{hu}²¹ ua³³/, /a²¹ t^h⁴^u²¹ p^{hu}⁵⁵/ and /p^{hu}³³ va³³/. There have not been many reports about the Phù Lá before, but one early mention is found in Abadie (1924:182f), who notes that

the Phù Lá are related to the Lô Lô but their vocabulary is clearly different. Another work on the Phù Lá is the report of Lục Bình Thủy and Nòng Trung (1975).

3.1 Distinctive features of Phu Kha

Four tones, stops in four manners of articulation, plain, aspirated, voiced, pre-nasalised (for the labial series) and syllabic nasals suggest a northern Yi heritage for Phu Kha. Further support for this claim come from the fact that Phu Kha possesses two series of clustered initial consonants, a dental series /t̬ tʰ t̪ dl/ and a velar series /k̬ kʰ k̪ gl ŋgl/ as well as /p̪/ as in *p̪a*³¹ 'leaf' and *psu*³¹ 'vomit'.

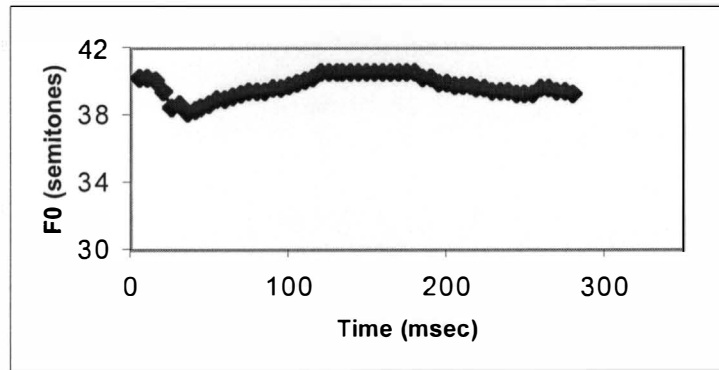
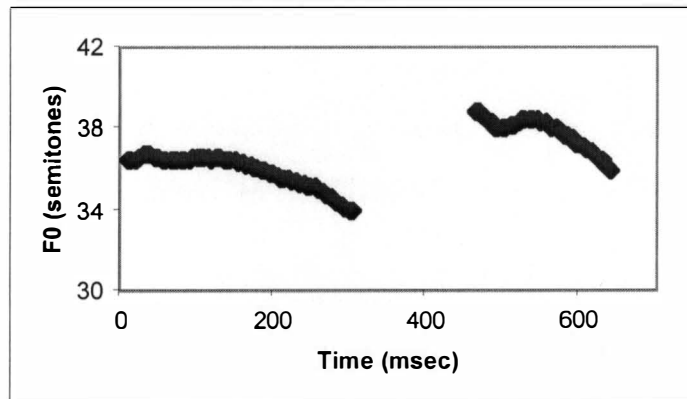
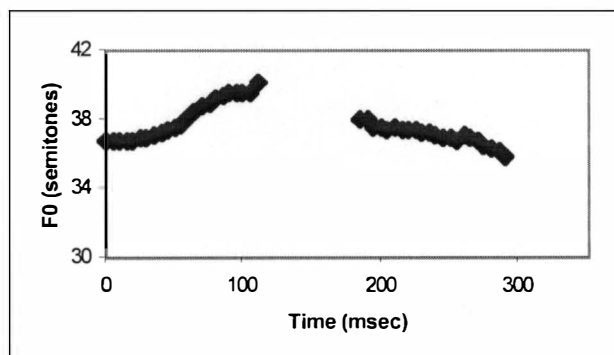
Initials.

p	p ^h	b	mb	f	v	m	w		
pj	p ^h j	bj		fj	vj	mj			
t	t ^h	d		s	z	n	ɬ	l	
t̬	t̬ ^h	dl							
ts	ts ^h	dz							
t̪	t̪ ^h	d̪		ɕ					
tj	t ^h j	dj				nj	ɬj	lj	j
kw	k ^h w	gw		xw					
k̬	k̬ ^h	gl							

Phu Kha has three tones with values 31, 35, 33, as well as a few words with the tone value 53. Several of these tone values can be accompanied with sharp glottal constriction at the end of the syllable. This feature is still easily perceived and has not as yet resulted in a tense/lax voice quality contrast as has happened in many Yi languages. Examples of some of these tonal contrasts are:

ha ³¹	'dry plot'	ŋa ³¹	'five'	vu ³¹	'far'	çi ³¹	'gold'	la ³¹	'tiger'
kho ³¹	'inside'	ja ³¹	'chicken'	mu ³¹	'horse'	th̬u ³¹			'face'
ŋu ³¹	'ox'	su ³¹	'firewood', 'to die'						
sa ³⁵	'three'	t̬u ³⁵	'four'	nia ³⁵	'cat'	ŋa ³⁵	'fish'	su ³⁵	'teeth'
tha ³³	'one'	ja ³³	'soul'	ŋ ³³	'two'				
ŋu ⁵³	'needle'								

Pitch plots for these tone shapes are provided below:

Figure 1: Tone plot for Phu Kha /ŋu³³ ŋu³³/ ‘egg’**Figure 2:** Tone plot for Phu Kha /m³¹ tɕa⁵³/ ‘wind’**Figure 3:** Tone plot for Phu Kha /mi³⁵ khu³¹/ ‘ashes’

In regard to syllable rhymes and codas, Phu Kha possesses syllabic nasals: *ŋ*³¹ ‘blow’, *ŋ*³³ ‘two’, and *ŋ*³⁵ ‘steam’ and it preserves the coda /-p/, as well as /-n -ŋ/, which is quite unusual for Northern Yi. Most northern Yi languages demonstrate strong atrophy of the right side of the syllable. Examples of these phenomena are:

ap ³⁵ khu ⁵³ ma ³¹	'pumpkin'
tɕap ³¹ ɕi ³¹	'pangolin'
lɕap ³⁵ kha ³³	'guest'
hai ³¹ ɕəp ³³ kha ³³	'husband'

3.2 *Comparative notes*

Phu Kha reflects the proto tone category *1 as 31 as is seen in: barking deer, bear, cat, sparrow, bat, foot, intestine, hammer, alcohol, star, cloud, rain, house, wide, spicy, drink, bark, roar, etc. and also some in 33. Proto tone *2 is reflected as 35 (or sometimes 31) as is seen in: horse, buffalo, tiger, dog, belly, liver, salt, price. Proto tone *3 is reflected as 33 as in: moon, dry, full, forget, and wait. The two dead tones are usually realised with tone values 31 and 33.

Dental clusters are an important feature of Phu Kha, because they are not widely attested in Yi languages except in Nisu, one of three main branches of Yi, cf Bradley 1999. According to Chen et al 1985 and Wu 1992, this kind of Yi, the Yiliang E Yi, is classified as Eastern Yi. In fact, Phu Kha appears to be situated close to a special subgroup of Nisu or Nyisu that includes the lectal continuum from Lunan County about 75 km SE of Kunming to the Vietnamese border.³ The dental-lateral clusters represent a hallmark innovation that defines this subgroup showing a gradient pattern of variation (data from Wu 1992).

This diagram below shows that pre-nasalised and voiced dental clusters are lost and clusters simplified variably with the change having started in the south in the Wenshan/Xichou areas as well as in Sani areas, whereas Yanshan and Lushan Nyisu retain the full set of four manners of articulation. Phu Kha shows family resemblance in being very similar to Phuwa and Phulaba (which are found at locations near to the Phu Kha of Lào Cai Province, Vietnam) in its place in the process of ongoing change within the lectal continuum. This pattern of implicational variation accords well but not perfectly with geographic distribution; Lunan Sani is, for example, out of place, but this unexpected result may be the result of this location being a regional center of contact possibly promoting sound change.

³ The Lunan Nyisu [ɲi⁵⁵ su³³ p^hu⁵⁵] are called locally Da Hei Yi (Great Black Yi). They number only 2,000 and live in a mountainous area far from the county seat. Their language is quite distinct from the much larger Sani of the same county. Local gazetteers from the Tang Dynasty onward report that they are descended from the Wuman.

1. Lunan Muzhu [ɲi ⁵⁵ su ³³ p ^h u ⁵⁵] ⁴	tɬ	thɬ	dɟ	ndɟh
2. Yanshan [p ^h o ²¹] and 3. Mengzi [p ^h u ²¹]	tɬ	thɬ	dɟ	ndɟ
4. Wenshan Phu Ua	tɬ	thɬ	dɟ	dɟ
5. Wenshan Phulaba	tɬ	thɬ	dɟ	dɟ
6. Phu Kha of Lào Cai Vietnam	tɬ	thɬ	dl	dl
7. Xichou [p ^h u ³³ va ³³] and 8. Lunan Sani	tɬ	ɬ	dɟ	dɟ
9. Wenshan [a ²¹ tɬa ²¹ p ^h u ⁵⁵]	tɬ	ɬ	tɬ	tɬ

This entire system represents an innovative development in these lects from proto-Loloish prefixes or initials where the parent language usually had labial clusters or the prefix *m- or *ʔ-, cf. Thurgood 1982 and Wu 1992. As the chart below shows the cross lectal variation of wavelike change in the forms of Nyisu of Lunan County *ɲi⁵⁵ su³³ p^hu⁵⁵* (1), Yanshan *p^ho²¹* (2), and Mengzi *p^hu²¹* (3), which have a complete system of plain unaspirated, aspirated, voiced, and pre-nasalised voiced stops with lateral clusters; the speech of Wenshan Phuwa (4) and Wenshan Phulaba (5), which have only three of the four initials with stop + lateral sequence, a situation identical to the Phu Kha of Vietnam (6); finally, Xichou *p^hu²² va²²* (7), Lunan Sani (8) as well as Wenshan *a²¹ tɬa²¹ p^hu⁵⁵* (9), which has simplified these clusters even more. Examples are:

Gloss	Loloish	1, 2, 3	4, 5	6	7, 8	9
'kick'	---	ndɟa ³³	dɟu ²¹	---	dɟo ³³	tɬu ³³
'full'	*m-bliŋ3	dɟɛ ²¹	dɟu ³³	dlɛ ³³	dɟɛ ³³	tɬɛ ³³
'bee'/'wasp'	*bya2	dɟu ³³	dɟa ³³	dla ³³	dɟa ²¹	tɬɛ ³³
'fly'	*byam1	dɟɿ ²¹		dlu ³¹		
'silver'	*plu1	thɬu ³³	thɬo ³³	tshu ³¹	ɬu ³³	ɬø ²¹
'white'	*plu1	thɬu ²¹	thɬo ³³	tshhu ³¹	ɬu ³³	ɬø ²¹
'face'	*pyu2	thɬo ⁵⁵	thɬy ³³	thɬu ³¹	ɬo ²¹	ɬu ²¹
'lame'	---	tɬa ³³	tɬa ³³	---	tɬo ³³	tɬu ⁵⁵

This regularity was discussed in Thurgood 1982 as an innovation as well (he included all classes of voiced stops, not just the labials). The table above records a larger data set with the gradient devoicing and cluster simplification on display.

That Phu Kha reflects dental clusters in parallel to other Nyisu languages, proto-tones in a complex way, the presence of syllabic nasals, and the four manners of stop articulation (plain, aspirated, voiced, and pre-nasalised voiced) suggests that Phu Kha belongs to northern Loloish, Nisu of the Eastern subbranch and supports Bradley's claim.

⁴ This 2000-strong Yi group of Lunan County—point 1—lives in a remote area, and preserves their traditional lifestyle much more than the much larger and better known Sani—point 9—of the same county.

4 Xá Phó, Laghuu, or Phù Lá Lão

The Xá Phó are officially classified in Vietnam as a part of the Phù Lá nationality, but the Xá Phó language is not mutually intelligible with the Phù Lá at other places. Xá Phó speakers are found in Lào Cai Province at Văn Bàn, Bảo Thắng, and Sa Pa Districts as well as in Cam Đường very near to Lào Cai City. A few are also located in Yên Bái Province to the south at Văn Yên and in Sơn La Province near Thuận Giáo City, cf. Map. In this paper we rely largely on data collected from Mr. Mã A Suân of Nậm Sang Commune, Sa Pa District, Lào Cai Province, but we also have some data from a location in Yên Bái Province just across the border from Lào Cai where the phonological system is somewhat different.

4.1 Distinctive features of Xá Phó

Xá Phó has the following set of initial consonants, including plain, aspirates, voiced stops, and pre-nasalised voiced stops.

p	t	ts	tɕ	k	ʔ
p ^h	t ^h	ts ^h	tɕ ^h	k ^h	
b	d	dz	dʒ	g	
mb	nd	ndz	ndʒ	ŋg	
m	n l		ɲ	ŋ	
f	s		ɕ	x	h
v	z		ʐ	ɣ	

It also has a series of velar plus lateral cluster, /kl k^hl gl ŋk^hl/

In comparison to the initials the rhymes of Xá Phó are comparatively simple.

i	ɿ	ui	u	
	ə		o	
ɛ			ɔ	
			a	
ɿ	kh ^h ɿ ³³			'four'
i	mi ²¹ ne ²⁴			'cat'
ui	mu ³³ ɲɛ ³³ khui ³³ ba ³³			'wind'
u	mu ²⁴ pa ²¹			'horse'
ə	ɲə ⁴⁴ pa ²¹			'buffalo'
o	mo ³³ tho ²⁴			'sky'
ɛ	mɛ ²¹ tɕho ⁵⁴ ma ³³			'window'
ɔ	mɔ ³³ li ²¹ va ⁴⁴			'rain'
a	ma ³³ po ³³		ma ⁴⁴ ma ³³	'bamboo'

Nasal codas are /-m -n -ŋ/. The labial and dental nasal codas occur with much less frequency than the velar.

m	mom ³³	‘fishnet’
n	tin ³³ ɲaŋ ³³	‘field’, ‘wet’
ŋ	moŋ ³¹ tɕhu ⁵⁴ tɕhu ²¹ pa ⁴⁴	‘fog’

Xá Phó has only one rising tone with the value 24. The other tones have the shapes 54, 44, 33, and 21

4.2 Comparative notes

We were able to obtain a small amount of data from a second location in Sơn La, which confirms the Lào Cai speech forms, whose autonym is [la21 ɔ44]. The tonal system appears to be identical to Lào Cai, as are many of the initials and finals.

Gloss	Lào Cai /la ²¹ yui ⁴⁴ /	Sơn La /la ²¹ ɔ ⁴⁴ /
‘star’	nɛ ³³ gui ³³ khɿ ³³ ba ³³	ma ³³ mu ²² kli ²²
‘rain’	mɔ ³³ li ²¹ va ⁴⁴	mɔ ⁴⁴ e ⁵⁵ a ²²
‘river’	i ³³ dzui ⁴⁴	i ²¹ tɕhu ⁴⁴
‘stone’	lui ⁵³ khuɿ ³³	lui ⁵⁴ khuɿ ⁴⁴
‘tree’	se ⁴⁴ ma ³³	se ⁵⁴ khɿa ⁵⁴
‘leaf’	se ⁴⁴ kha ⁴⁴	se ²² khɿa ⁴⁴

Xá Phó speech forms differ from Phu Kha significantly by not undergoing the developments that have led to the dental cluster series /tɬ thɬ dl/, illustrated above in Phu Kha. Xá Phó appears instead to have undergone an innovative change of its own, as the labials, which are the source of /tɬ thɬ dl/, have developed into velars, including velar clusters.⁵ Therefore, we can conclude that it is not likely that Xá Phó is a member of the Yiliang Eastern Yi subgroup.

While helping us to exclude Xá Phó from the Yiliang branch of Eastern Yi, these developments in Xá Phó can also help us locate where it belongs in the wider picture of Yi languages. Many lexical items of the parent language with original labials including many with additional /l j/ have become velars often with clustered lateral, e.g. *b-le2 ‘four’ is khɿ³³ or khɿ⁴⁴, *plu1 ‘white, silver’ is khɿu³³ or khɿu²¹, *pyu2 ‘face’ is ki⁴⁴, and *bun1 ‘shirt’ is khɿu²¹. Wu (1992) reports that Wenshan Zuohe shows this same kind of development:

⁵ The labial initials are not the only source of velar + lateral clusters in Xá Phó.

Gloss	Xá Phó	Wenshan Zuoke
'excrement'	khɿ ⁵⁴	khɿ ³³
'silver'	khɿu ³³	khɿu ³³
'white'	khɿu ²¹	khɿu ²¹
'fly'	ŋgo ³³	ŋu ²¹
'face'	ki ⁴⁴	khɿu ⁴⁴ du ⁴⁴
'bee'	ŋga ³³	ge ²¹

Wenshan Zuoke belongs to Southeastern Yi, Wenxi subtype, and is found in a location close to the place where Xá Phó speakers are found today. While the evidence unearthed to date remains somewhat meager, it appears that Xá Phó belongs to the Southeastern Yi subgroup. What is more certain, however, is that Phu Kha and Xá Phó, though belonging to one nationality in Vietnam, come from two differing and relatively distant subgroupings of Yi that have undergone rather different innovations with regard to the prefixed/clustered labials.

5 Lolo

The Lolo nationality of Vietnam is divisible into two mutually unintelligible linguistic groups—the Flowery and Red Lolo, on the one hand, who live in Hà Giang Province at Đồng Văn and Mèo Vạc Districts, and the Black Lolo, who live in Cao Bằng Province at Bảo Lạc District. The Flowery Lolo of Hà Giang reside in Xín Cái (Mèo Vạc) and at Lũng Cù (Đồng Văn) within 5 km of the Sino-Vietnam border. The Black Lolo live in the villages Hồng Tri and Đức Hạnh (Bảo Lạc) not far from the Bảo Lạc District capital on the China border. They had a combined population of 3,100 in the 1989 census.⁶ We report here on the speech of Ms. Lò Thị Mi of Mèo Vạc, who was 28 years of age at the time we elicited the data. The Red Lolo call themselves [mã⁵³ tsi⁵³]. There is another group in Wenshan Prefecture, Funing County, Muyang Jieshe, Daping Village Cluster, Musang village who speak a very similar language and who call themselves [mo³¹ ndzi³¹]. The [mo³¹ ndzi³¹] live about 25 km to the north of the Vietnam border and are thought to belong to the Southeastern Yi. The linguistic situation in Wenshan Prefecture is very complex, however, as very many Yi groups reside there, possessing many different groups of Loloish speakers, cf. [//yi.peoples.org/](http://yi.peoples.org/). On the basis of the geographic proximity and linguistic resemblance, it is supposed that the Lolo of Vietnam are genetically close to the Lolo of Wenshan prefecture, [//yipeople.org/southeastern/s_lolo.htm/](http://yipeople.org/southeastern/s_lolo.htm/).

⁶ Nguyễn (1985) reports that there are a few living in Mường Khương in Lào Cai as well as at Phóng Thổ in Lai Châu Province.

5.1 Special features of Vietnam Lolo

Lolo has the most complex initial system of the three languages reported on, possessing three sibilant series: plain [s ts tsh], retroflex [ʂ tʂ tʂh], and palatal [ç tç tçh] as well as having four kinds of stops plain /p t k q/, aspirated /ph th kh qh/, voiced /b d g/, and pre-nasalised before a voiceless stop /mp nt ŋk nq/.⁷ The complete set of initials is:

p	ph	b	mp	m	f	v	
ts	tsh		nts				
t	th	d	nt	n	s	z	l
tʂ	tʂh	dʂ	ntʂ		ʂ	ʐ	
tç	tçh	dç	ntç	ɲ	ç	ʝ	
k	kh	g	ŋk	ŋ	x	ɣ	
q	qh		nq				

Red Lolo [mã⁵³ tsi⁵³] has five tones with values 53, 31, 312, 44, and 35, which we have not plotted here.

Rhymes are:

i	ε	e	ɔ	o	u	a
		ẽ	õ	õ		ã
ia	ua	iã	uã			

i	tçi ³¹	'teeth'
ε	qhε ⁴⁴	'excrement'
e	qhε ³¹²	'eye'
ɔ	ŋɔ ⁴⁴	'duck'
u	ɲu ⁵³	'cow'
a	tsa ³⁵	'boil'
ẽ	qẽ ⁵³	'ear'
õ	çõ ⁵³	'nose'
õ	bõ ⁵³	'belly'
ã	bã ⁴⁴	'to fly'
ia	phia ³⁵	'leaf'
ua	vua ⁴⁴	'pig'
iã	piã ³⁵	'left'
uã	qhuã ⁴⁴	'room'

⁷ This complex initial corresponds elsewhere in Yi to pre-nasalised voiced stops. Phonetically, however, in Viet Lolo the stop or affricate component is voiceless.

5.2 *Comparative comments*

From our data sets it is evident that Lolo is phonologically and lexically quite unlike either Phu Kha or Xá Phó. We believe that Vietnam Lolo (LL) is, in fact, a form of Mo'ang or [muɑŋ⁵¹], which is found in the extreme east of the Yi (Loloish) settlement area in Funing County on the border of Yunnan and Guangxi. This language is called White Lolo (WL) by the local people. Wu 1993, 1994 reports on this language at length, concluding that it differs quite significantly from other forms of Yi of the area. Viet Lolo possesses features more like Mo'ang, which we will focus on here. Mr. Lama Ziwo of our department has recently returned from a field work trip to this area where he found two languages called Lolo in Xinhua Township of Funing County autonym [ma³³ ɲa³³], and exonym Long Haired Lolo and in Bailun Township of Funing County autonym [maŋ³³] and exonyms White Lolo or Short Trouser Lolo.

The resemblance of Wu's Mo'ang data and Viet Lolo is clear and unquestionable. Some important common features are: uvular consonants /q q^h ɲq/, diphthongs (Wu treats them as secondary articulations /pj phj mbj tj thj/, where I have transcribed them as diphthongs. There remain considerable differences; notably the former has a pre-glottalised series of initials /ʔm ʔmj ʔn ʔnj ʔl ʔlj ʔz/ (LL has none), retains final /-p -t -k -m -n -ŋ/ (LL has none), and has a full set of tense/lax contrasts, which LL may also have. There are also many uniquely similar forms (WL/LL): phjaŋ³³/phĩã⁴⁴ 'face', pja³³/pia⁵³ 'bee', ʔa³³/ʔɔ⁴⁴ 'son', kau³³/kua³¹ 'nine', ma³¹/mɔ⁴⁴ 'dream', nei³³/nie⁴⁴ 'today'.

Thus, the local exonym, the autonym, and the geographic location all make it very probable that the Lolo of Vietnam are related to the White Lolo of Funing and neighboring areas. Beyond this evidence is the similarity of phonological inventory (esp. uvular consonant initials), which establish the link between these two. Most importantly, there are examples of unique vocabulary not found at other Yi locations. Despite similarities, it is also evident that White Lolo of Funing possesses even more archaic features than the Red Lolo language of Vietnam in the strong retention of final consonants.

The number of Yi speakers in Vietnam is not great, yet it is evident that they and their brethren across the border in China are all peripheral to the main body of Yi speaker further to the north and west. It is not to be forgotten as well that the Black Lolo of Cao Bằng Province remain to be studied. But even without material on this subgroup, it is clear that through isolation Viet Lolo appears to have preserved some important characteristics that will, one hopes, give us a better understanding of this language group. The dictum that small groups are often more informative about history than larger ones seems to apply here.

Map: Tibeto-Burman groups of northern Vietnam.



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