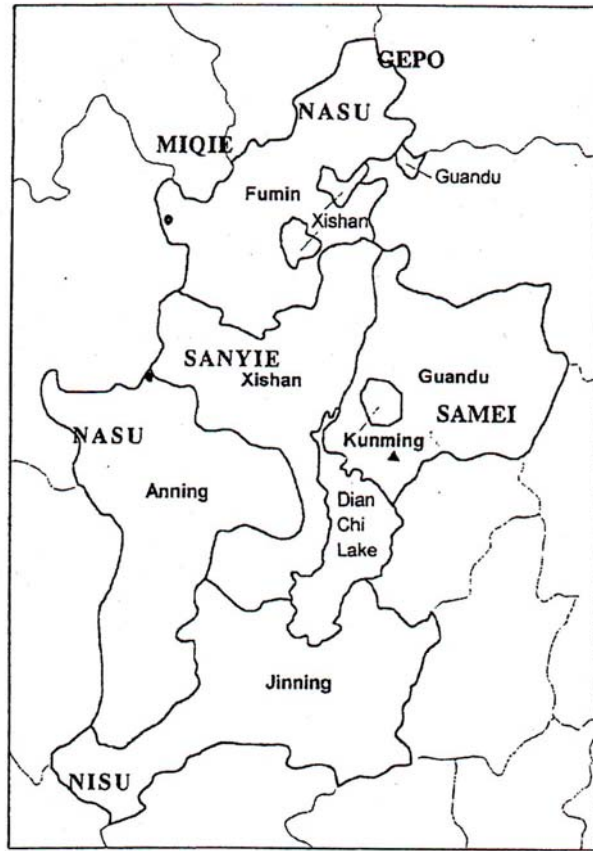


The Yi of Kunming



- Huang Yi
- ▲ Samataw

# LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT IN CHINA: THE YI OF KUNMING

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## 1. Who are the Yi?

The Yi are one of China's 55 minority nationalities, with a population of over seven million. They live mainly in the southwest of the country; there are also a few in northern Laos and Vietnam. Like many other such nationalities, they are a heterogeneous group classified together by the Chinese but with very great internal linguistic and cultural differences, in this case approximately similar in degree to those within the Romance languages. For more details see Bradley (1979/1991, 1987).

The usual Chinese linguistic classification of the Yi divides them into six subgroups. This includes Eastern or Nasu, Northern or Nosu and Southern or Nisu, among which there is a great deal of similarity; and Southeastern, Central and Western, which are more diverse and some of which appear to be more closely related to other language clusters such as Lisu and Lahu. Even within a subgroup such as Eastern Yi there are substantial internal linguistic differences, often preventing mutual intelligibility.

Because official Chinese policy accords recognition only to a few 'standard' varieties of Yi, almost all the other languages and dialects within Yi are endangered and many are in the process of disappearing. In this paper we will discuss the situation of one such group, the Sanyie, and give some background information about the surrounding Yi languages.

The Kunming area is particularly significant for the Yi as, according to their traditional written history, it was their original homeland, from which they dispersed starting about 1500 years ago. Prior to that time, they were ruled by a series of Yi dynasties including the Dian and Cuan who controlled eastern Yunnan from their centres around Dian Lake near Kunming up to about 800 AD.

## 2. The Yi of the Kunming area

The Sanyie [sa<sup>21</sup> ɲɛ<sup>21</sup>] or [sa<sup>21</sup> ɲwɛ<sup>21</sup>] ɲɛ<sup>21</sup> are a small group of about 20,000 Yi who live immediately to the west of Kunming city in central Yunnan. They live mainly in Xishan District, just west of Kunming, but also in northern Anning County and southwestern Fumin County to the south and north of Xishan. Sanyie, like many surrounding languages, is severely endangered; there are no monolingual speakers at all, and the language has been completely replaced by Chinese in some areas. In most areas children have imperfect or no knowledge of Sanyie; grandparents talk to their grandchildren only in Chinese. In places closer to Kunming even middle-aged people are semispeakers at best. The trigger for this rapid transmission failure over a period of less than two generations appears to have been increasing direct government influence and more intensive contacts with outsiders since 1950.

The Sanyie are not the only Yi group in this area; immediately to their west, north and south there are the Nasu (in Chinese, Hei Yi: a range of varieties similar to that described in Ma (1948) and Gao (1958)), and in a couple of villages the Sanyie and Nasu live together. In such places the Sanyie also speak Nasu, but almost no Nasu speak Sanyie. Most of the Nasu, a much larger group of several hundred thousand speakers, live further north, in Fumin, Luquan, Wuding and surrounding counties. These locations are shown in the Map.

To the east of Kunming, in Guandu District, there is a group of similar size to the Sanyie whom the Chinese call Samei but who call themselves [sa<sup>21</sup> ni<sup>53</sup>]. The main published study of this group is Xie (1987) which contains extremely limited language data. Further east still in Lunan County are the well-known group called Sani by the Chinese, who call themselves [ni<sup>21</sup>] and whose language is described in Ma (1951) among other places. Due to the similarities among their names, the Sanyie, Samei and Sani are often confused. Another group is the [sa<sup>33</sup> ma<sup>21</sup> taw<sup>21</sup>] of Zijun village in Guandu Region south of Kunming, occasionally called Samaduo in the Chinese ethnographic literature.

Since 1990 we have been doing field research on these languages, and warmly thank all the speakers and officials who have helped us. We would like to dedicate this paper to the memory of Na Jiankun, a recently deceased Sanyie teacher of Chinese at Guizhou University, who first introduced us to her language in 1984. She was the only formally trained language worker from her group. We are very grateful to colleagues at the Yunnan Institute of Nationalities and especially to Prof Deng Qiyao and other colleagues at the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences who arranged and assisted this study which is part of an ongoing co-operation between our two institutions. We are also glad to acknowledge the funding support of the UNESCO Endangered Languages program.

### 3. The Yi autonym

The source of the [sa] or [sq] syllable in the Yi autonoms in the Kunming area is unclear and needs further investigation; perhaps it may be connected with Wusa, the name of a former Yi kingdom in part of northwestern Guizhou and northeastern Yunnan, and with the first syllable of the Hani/Akha name for themselves, [xa]/[za]. The second syllable is obviously cognate with the traditional name used by most Eastern Yi, Northern Yi, Southern Yi and some Southeastern Yi including the Sani. This is derived from an etymon \*ɲwi<sup>2</sup>, supported by cognates in Nasu, Nosu, Nisu, Sani and of course Sanyie and Samei, as shown in Table 1; the form found in southeastern varieties of Sanyie is crucial for the reconstruction of the initial syllable. In most languages (and in most varieties of Sanyie) the cluster \*ɲw is reduced to [ɲ] or [n], sometimes with an effect on the rhyme development. It also occurs as the second syllable of the Hani name and the old Akha name which occurs in traditional texts. It may be possible to relate this further to other names in [li] such as the first syllable of Lisu/Lipo, given that in Southwestern Mandarin we find frequent alternation and variation between /n/ and /l/, especially before /i/. Having noted the fact that there is often variation between \*l and \*n, it might be tempting to go further to suggest variation between \*a and \*i and link these forms with the first syllable of the Lahu and Lalo (Western Yi) names for themselves.

**Table 1: Cognates of the Ni Group Name \*ɲwi<sup>2</sup>**

Sanyie	sa <sup>21</sup> ɲe <sup>21</sup> /sa <sup>21</sup> ɲwe <sup>21</sup> /sa <sup>21</sup> ɲwi <sup>21</sup>
Samei	sa <sup>21</sup> ni <sup>21</sup>
Sani	ni <sup>21</sup>
Nasu (Yunnan)	ne <sup>55</sup> /ne <sup>33</sup>
Nasu (Guizhou)	nu <sup>55</sup> /ni <sup>55</sup> /no <sup>55</sup>
Nosu (Sichuan)	ni <sup>21</sup>
Hani	xa <sup>21</sup> ni <sup>21</sup>
Akha	za <sup>21</sup> ni <sup>21</sup>

In any case, we believe it is more appropriate to use the term Ni Group (or should it be Ngwi Group?) to refer to these languages, rather than pejorative or modern exonyms (used by outsiders, in this case the Chinese) such as Lolo (Luoluo), Wuman or Yi; or ancient dynastic names such as Dian and Cuan. It should be noted that this etymon has nothing to do with the ‘black’ etymon now used as the first syllable of some more modern Yi subgroup names such as Nasu and Nosu. In the latter names and in Lisu the second syllable is the widespread ‘person’ nominaliser suffix \*su<sup>1</sup>, reflexes of which are also used as third person pronouns in some other languages such as Lahu and Burmese.

Some Sanyie have a folk etymology for their subgroup name: as discussed further below, in many varieties of Sanyie, ‘charcoal’ [sa<sup>21</sup> ɲe<sup>21</sup>] and the name have merged to [sa<sup>21</sup> ɲe<sup>21</sup>] like other instances of [ɲw]. Some people in these areas believe that this name comes from the fact that they used to produce and sell charcoal for Kunming, that they are the ‘charcoal people’. However speakers in the southeast of the Sanyie area who keep [ɲw] and [] distinct do not have this idea.

Many Sanyie are uncertain what to call themselves in Chinese; most now say that they are Bai Yi ‘white Yi’; before 1950 they called themselves Bai Luoluo, but this term is not used in China now. Of course the term Bai Yi is also applied to many other culturally Sinicised Yi groups. According to Sanyie tradition, their original home was the Xiaoximen area, the west gate of Kunming city itself, from where they moved westwards into the Xishan area. The Sanyie have no books, and no tradition of having had books; in this they are unlike most surrounding groups including the Nasu, Samei and Sani.

Sanyie presents a typical example of language death in progress. Firstly, there are doubtless many residents of the Kunming area with unremembered Sanyie ancestry. In the villages closest to the city, Chejiabi, Shiju and Zhaozong at the foot of Xishan, the language is dying; only those over sixty speak well, with some younger people able to understand a bit; but children do not know the language at all, even though their grandparents, who are bilingual, often care for them. These villages have long been in contact with the Han; the main road from Kunming to Dali used to pass right through the centre of Chejiabi. They are now completely surrounded and outnumbered by Han Chinese and well-integrated into the urban economy.

In the first villages in the mountains, such as Daxing and Huahongyuan, the youngest fluent speakers are young adults, but again children are not learning the language. These villages have been in close contact with the Han for many years. In the next ring of villages out, such as Baimei, Yuhua and those in northeast Gulu, closer contact with Han Chinese started after 1950 and the language is still used to a limited extent by young people, but many are semispeakers. The most distant villages, such as those in western Tuanjie, central Gulu, Anning and Fumin, are still relatively remote but have also started to have extensive contact with Han Chinese and very few young people speak Sanyie there.

The provincial government has recognised the predominant position of the Yi and other minority nationalities in Tuanjie Township in the southwest of Xishan District and Gulu Township in the northwest of Xishan District by designating Tuanjie as a Yi and Bai township and Gulu as a Yi township; the other nearby nationalities are mainly Bai in the eastern part of Tuanjie and a few Miao in western Gulu and Tuanjie. Most of the Yi in western Gulu are Nasu; the main dividing line is the Pudu He, but there are a few Nasu villages to its east in Gulu and Anning and a few Sanyie villages to its west in northwestern Gulu and southwestern Fumin where the two varieties are in the closest contact. We are in the process of conducting a full survey of the area and plan to report on this in the future.

#### 4. The linguistic position of Sanyie

Chinese linguists have classified the Yi of Kunming and Anning as the Kun-An vernacular of the Eastern dialect of Yi; this presumably is meant to include the Sanyie, Samei and Samaduo. The Sani are classified as Southeastern Yi along with the Axi, Azhe and Azha who live further to the south in Mile County and elsewhere.

The main initial consonant characteristic which distinguishes Sanyie, Samei and Samaduo from Nasu and other Eastern Yi varieties is the lack of distinct prenasalised or breathy voiced initial stops; where most Nasu varieties have [mb], [mp<sup>h</sup>] or [b<sup>h</sup>], these languages have merged these with the plain voiced stops. They also lack a distinct voiceless, creaky or breathy nasal series such as [hm], [m̥] or [m<sup>h</sup>] as often found in Nasu, and apart from the speech of one Sanyie village, Zhaozong, also lack a voiceless lateral. Another difference from most types of Eastern Yi including ‘standard’ Nasu is the absence of retroflex initials [t<sup>h</sup> ɖ ɳɖ ɳ] which derive from a fusion of \*labial plus medial \*l/y/r initials as in Nasu [t<sup>h</sup>u<sup>21</sup>] ‘white’ from \*plu<sup>1</sup>, Bradley (1979/1991) etymon 507 (hereafter PL 507), or Nasu [ɲo<sup>33</sup>] ‘many’ from \*mya<sup>2</sup> (PL 752). In Sanyie most of these are merged with the corresponding alveolars or alveopalatals, as also happens in some southern varieties of Nasu spoken around Kunming adjacent to the Sanyie.

Developments of some rhymes are extremely regular; for example the consistent Sanyie reflex of \*ak is the back vowel [ɑ], as in ‘pig’ [vɑ<sup>35</sup>] from \*wak<sup>L</sup> (PL 21), ‘hand’ [lɑ<sup>35</sup>] from \*lak<sup>L</sup> (PL 111) and ‘go up’ [dɑ<sup>53</sup>] from \*ʔdak<sup>H</sup> (PL 652) among many others. For other rhymes there are conditioned splits; for example \*a has [u], [o] and [ɯ] among its regular Sanyie reflexes: [u] in ‘bamboo’ [mu<sup>44</sup>] \*ma<sup>1</sup> (PL 295B), ‘eat’ [dzu<sup>21</sup>] \*dza<sup>2</sup> (PL 629), ‘feed’ [tsu<sup>33</sup>] \*s-dza<sup>2</sup> (PL 766) and ‘tiger’ [lu<sup>21</sup>] \*k-la<sup>2</sup> (PL 13) versus [o] in ‘fish’ [ɲo<sup>33</sup>] \*ɲa<sup>2</sup> (PL 70), ‘meat’ [xo<sup>33</sup>] \*xa<sup>2</sup> (PL 135) and ‘mother’ [mo<sup>33</sup>] \*ma<sup>3</sup> (PL 200) and [ɯ] in ‘nose’ [nu<sup>44</sup> khu<sup>21</sup>] \*s-na<sup>1</sup> kau<sup>2</sup> (PL 93); these forms also illustrate some of the tonal splits conditioned by prefix and initial combinations. As in many related languages [ɲ] is an allophone of /i/ after certain initials including alveolar affricates and fricatives.

**Table 2: Reflexes of Ni Group Proto-Tones**

	Sanyie	Samaduo	Samei
*H	53	35	53
*L	45	55	55
*1	44	21	44
*2	21/33	33	21
*3	33	44	33

Table 2 shows the main Sanyie, Samei and Samaduo reflexes of Ni Group (‘Proto-Loloish’) tones as reconstructed in Bradley (1979/1991).

Of course there are also some conditioned splits and sandhi changes which affect the reflexes of these tones; for example some prefixed \*2 tone syllables have Sanyie [33] tone rather than [21] tone. One can see that all three languages share the high level or rising pitch reflex of \*L tone (Matisoff 1972), as in Nasu of northern Yunnan and northwesternmost Weining in Guizhou and in Nosu of Sichuan. This is also found in some environments in Sani, Lisu, Lahu and other Ni Group languages; for example the well-known [35] reflex of some \*L tone described in Matisoff (1970) and others such as Lisu [55] indicated in Bradley (1979/1991). In Southeastern Yi (Sani and so on) and Southern Yi (Nisu and so on) as well as the Panxian area of southwestern Guizhou most \*L tone etyma have a low creaky reflex [21], as also seen

in reflexes of etyma in most environments in Lahu, Lisu, Hani/Akha and other Ni Group languages. The easternmost part of Nasu covering most of Guizhou has low rising [13] as the regular reflex of \*L tone, which may provide a clue about the beginning of the process of \*[21] changing to modern [55].

In general it thus appears that these three languages are indeed closer to Eastern Yi than to other subgroups of Yi, and closest to adjacent varieties such as the nearby Nasu, and that the original Chinese classification is correct.

### 5. Internal differences within Sanyie

The degree of dialect differentiation within Sanyie is very great despite the small distances involved.

In the southeastern part of the Sanyie area, speakers in five villages use a cluster of velar plus /w/ which corresponds to a palatal before front vowel rhymes and a simple velar before most rhymes elsewhere. Some examples are given in Table 3.

**Table 3: Labiovelars and Non-Labiovelars in Sanyie**

	Chejiabi, Shiju	Huahongyuan, Yuhua, Zhaozong	elsewhere
‘comb’ (noun)	[kwi <sup>53</sup> ]	[kwe <sup>53</sup> ]	[tɕi <sup>53</sup> ], [tɕe <sup>53</sup> ]
‘dog’	[khwi <sup>21</sup> ]	[khwe <sup>21</sup> ]	[tɕh <sup>21</sup> ]
‘village’	[khwa <sup>53</sup> ]	[khwa <sup>53</sup> ]	[kha <sup>53</sup> ]
‘Sanyie’	[sɑ <sup>21</sup> ŋwe <sup>21</sup> ]	[sɑ <sup>21</sup> ŋwe <sup>21</sup> ]	[sɑ <sup>21</sup> ŋe <sup>21</sup> ]
‘tile’	[ŋwæɿ <sup>21</sup> ]	[ŋwæɿ <sup>21</sup> ]	[ŋæɿ <sup>21</sup> ]

In some of these examples, such as ‘dog’ \*kwi<sup>2</sup> (PL 18) and ‘comb’ \*gwi<sup>2</sup> the reconstruction of a labiovelar is well-supported. In others, such as ‘village’ \*kak<sup>H</sup> (PL 355A) the reconstruction suggested by cognates elsewhere is a simple velar, so the Sanyie labiovelar may be an innovation before some rhymes, parallel to the Lisu \*a > /wa/.

In Zhaozong there are voiceless laterals in a number of words derived from stop-prefixed laterals or stop plus lateral clusters which elsewhere in Sanyie have [tɕh] or [th], as in ‘white’ (PL 507 \*pl) ‘moon’ (PL 318 \*b-l) ‘clothes’ (PL 228 ‘trousers’ \*k-l); in most such words the Zhaozong form is conservative, with parallels in other nearby Ni languages such as Nasu.

There are some local differences with syllabic nasal realisation of syllables with [m] followed by high nonfront vowels; the speech of Qitai in south central Tuanjie Township is particularly extreme in also including [ŋ] syllables and words with [o] in this process, thus collapsing words such as ‘bamboo’ (PL 295B), ‘horse’ (PL 6) and ‘old’ (PL 535) - elsewhere [mu<sup>44</sup>], [mu<sup>33</sup>] and [mo<sup>21</sup>] - along with ‘I’ (PL 438), ‘cry’ (PL 670) and ‘five’ (PL 482) - elsewhere [ŋu<sup>44</sup>], [ŋu<sup>44</sup>] and [ŋ<sup>21</sup>] - to the single syllabic [m] with the appropriate tone. A similar process applies in some subtypes of Sanyie to [ni] and [nu] syllables which are pronounced as syllabic [n] as in ‘day’ (PL 461) and the second syllable of ‘finger’ (PL 113) - elsewhere [ni<sup>33</sup>] and [lɑ<sup>35</sup>nu<sup>44</sup>].

There are many other less spectacular phonological differences between the various subtypes of Sanyie: differences in the distribution of [ɲ] versus [n] before high vowels, in [u] versus [i] in various environments, and so on. There are also major lexical differences in some very frequent words, as shown in the following table.

**Table 4: Lexical Differences in Six Sanyie Locations**

	‘rice’	‘water’	‘winnowing basket’
Zhaozong (E)	[a <sup>33</sup> ma <sup>53</sup> ]	[u <sup>33</sup> dʒɑ <sup>53</sup> ]	[khwa <sup>35</sup> mu <sup>21</sup> ]
Chejiabi (SE)	[na <sup>33</sup> na <sup>35</sup> ]	[i <sup>33</sup> ɲɑ <sup>53</sup> ]	[i <sup>55</sup> mo <sup>33</sup> ]
Gulu (NE)	[a <sup>33</sup> ɔ <sup>35</sup> ]	[u <sup>33</sup> ɲɑ <sup>53</sup> ]	[kha <sup>35</sup> mo <sup>21</sup> ]
Qinghe (N)	[ma <sup>33</sup> ma <sup>33</sup> ]	[i <sup>33</sup> ɲɑ <sup>53</sup> ]	[i <sup>55</sup> mo <sup>33</sup> ]
Luomian (NW)	[ɔ <sup>33</sup> ɔ <sup>33</sup> ]	[u <sup>33</sup> ɲɑ <sup>53</sup> ]	[u <sup>33</sup> mo <sup>33</sup> ]
Tuoji (SW)	[a <sup>33</sup> na <sup>35</sup> ]	[i <sup>33</sup> ɲɑ <sup>53</sup> ]	[u <sup>33</sup> tʃi <sup>35</sup> tʃɑ <sup>53</sup> ]

Speakers in other areas may recognise the words used by other Sanyie; they may have relevant comments on them as well. For example, some say that the Chejiabi and Tuoji words for ‘rice’ are baby talk, and that the Qinghe and Zhaozong words for ‘rice’ are borrowed from Nasu.

Morphosyntactic differences within Sanyie are much more limited; for example, all share the grammaticalisation of the verbs of extent reported in Bradley (1995).

## 6. Conclusion

We would like to emphasise the linguistic importance of speech varieties such as Sanyie, and the urgency of descriptive linguistic work with such groups. Very many Yi and other groups are losing their languages, some more rapidly than others. A major part of the linguistic and cultural history of the Yi is disappearing with them. It is also very important for a group’s self-esteem that their language should be given the full attention and respect that it deserves.

**Table 5: Sanyie *pinyin* and Phonetic Values**

b	p	bb	m	f	v	[p	p <sup>h</sup>	b	m	f	v
d	t	dd	n			t	t <sup>h</sup>	d	n		
z	c	zz		s	ss	ts	ts <sup>h</sup>	dz		s	z
zh	ch	zzh		sh	ssh	tʃ	tʃ <sup>h</sup>	dʒ		ʃ	ʒ
j	q	jj	ny	x	y	tɕ	tɕ <sup>h</sup>	dʒ	ɲ	ɕ	ʝ
g	k	gg	ng	h	hh	k	k <sup>h</sup>	g	ŋ	x	ɣ
i	ee	u						i/ɿ	u	u	
ie	e	o						e	ɤ	o	
ai	er	uo						a	æɪ	ɔ	
	a								ɑ		
—			nū	‘speak’							44
			nú	‘monkey’							35
«			nǔ	‘ill’							21

\	nù	‘bean’	53
	nu	‘get well/can’	33]

As we have seen, it is often the case that an endangered language also provides crucial linguistic evidence. For example, Sanyie provides the only direct attestation of original labiovelars among the Ni Group languages as a whole.

We have devised a *pinyin* version of Sanyie which is intended to help in language maintenance efforts using the Reformed Yunnan Yi Script (*Yunnan guifan Yiwen*) pronounced in Sanyie. Similar efforts are underway in the Samaduo village south of Kunming. This Sanyie *pinyin* uses the conventions shown in Table 5, which are also designed to help in learning *Putonghua*.

The Yunnan Nationalities Commission is in favour of wider use of the Yi characters in school; this will be easier if young nonspeakers can also be taught how to pronounce things in their parents’ or grandparents’ own local speech variety. Sanyie teachers in some areas have welcomed this Sanyie *pinyin*, and we hope it will help in their language maintenance efforts.

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