

## INTRODUCTION

The Be (Ong-Be) language is spoken on the northern coast of Hainan Island (see the attached map), mainly around Limkow (Linkao) Prefecture. As late as in 1933, the language was considered to be close to Burmese.<sup>8)</sup> With the publication of Fr. François M. Savina's *Le Vocabulaire Bê* by André-George Haudricourt (Publications de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient, Volume 1vii, 1965), its systematic features became known to the academic world. Savina believed Be to be a kind of Li (Loi), one of the Kadai languages. With the appearance of Chinese publications on the Li language since the 1950s,<sup>9)</sup> succeeding those earlier reports on Li by Western missionaries and scholars,<sup>10)</sup> this view also became untenable, as we find a much closer relationship of Be to Tai, Fang-kuei Li's "Central Tai" in particular,<sup>11)</sup> than Kadai. Since these Chinese publications do not present more than brief outlines of the sound system of Li, clarification of the exact genealogical relationship of Be will have to be postponed until the Li-Chinese dictionary, reported to have been completed in 1957, becomes available to us all.<sup>12)</sup>

Meanwhile Be presents a fascinating case of development of minority languages surrounding the Chinese language, whose entire histories and linguistic structures are the results of constant Chinization or a typological transition from either the Austroasiatic or Altaic to the Chinese type.<sup>13)</sup> By tracing the development latitudinally (i.e. placing a given structure in the context of the typological transition from the surrounding languages) or longitudinally (i.e. rechecking the transition with the historical development of the Chinese language), we can establish what is the basic trend or actuality of such development and, perhaps, revise our view on linguistic history in general, which is still divided by two mutually conflicting views, the so-called Stammbaumtheorie and the Wellentheorie. It is hoped that this lexicon will provide specialists in this field of linguistic science with reliable data for such tracing and rechecking.

Despite Haudricourt's careful editing of Savina's notes and systematic additions of comparative Tai and Chinese linguistic data, the Savina-Haudricourt lexicon is still not quite sufficient for a modern comparative study, because of its "tantalizing transcription and analysis." In all fairness, we must of course immediately add that the "puzzling variations" we find in Savina's lexicon are partially due to the diversity of Chinese loan-words in Be. However, Savina seems to have failed to hear some very fundamental phonetic features of Be, to say nothing of its intricate tone sandhi. For instance, the implosive initial [ɓ] is not distinguished from the explosive initial [b] (our [v]), though Savina's writing *b* for our [v] may be due to some dialectal difference of Be – in Hainanese (Hainan Hoklo) the initial [b] of Bonshio, a southern dialect, corresponds to the initial [v] of Heingtua, a northern dialect. None other than Haudricourt himself has been more aware of these lapses. If we do succeed in presenting any better data than Savina's, much of the credit should go to Haudricourt who cautioned me from the very beginning where Savina failed. None of this should imply any lack of respect for Savina's

work. Quite to the contrary, I have had **more than a few moments** of admiration for Savina during my own field work, especially considering **the time he worked** in and the training he had had before being exposed to Be.

An outline of the Be sound system is given here, **just enough** to make use of this lexicon for the above-mentioned purposes. A sketch of its **syntactic structure** and annotated texts will be published separately.

# THE BE LANGUAGE

A Classified Lexicon of Its Limkow Dialect

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