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Where did the Ngạn People Come From? Ritual Manuscripts among the Ngạn in Northern Vietnam

Abstract: The Ngạn people are a small local population of Tai-language speakers in the eastern districts of Cao Bằng province in northernmost Vietnam. They are reportedly descendants of bodyguards hired by the Mạc royal court during the seventeenth century. It is the aim of this paper to investigate where they came from, using Vietnamese and Chinese ethnological studies, on-site fieldwork, and textual analysis. My preliminary conclusion is that the original homeland of the Ngạn was in the Youjiang River valley in central-western Guangxi. Numerous strands of information point to a strong connection with the native chieftaincy of Tianzhou, while the lyrics of traditional songs sung by the Ngạn point to the region of the former chieftaincy of Si'en, just to the east of Tianzhou.

1 Introduction

The present paper is the product of two related research projects. The aim of the first is to produce critical annotated editions of traditional manuscripts in Zhuang and related Tai-Kadai languages from Guangxi and contiguous provinces in the southern part of China.¹

The aim of the second project is to consolidate our survey of traditional Zhuang manuscripts, extending it further to the southwestern part of Guangxi and across the border into Vietnam. In Vietnam, our potential range includes all of the north-eastern and northern provinces in which Tai speakers and Chinese-style character scripts are found. Basically, this means all the territory to the north of the Red River valley, though Tai groups and character scripts are also found in scattered locations well to the south. A key focus here has been to document separately the languages and vernacular scripts of the Tày and the various Nùng groups. The Tày are mostly residents of very long standing in this region, to all intents and purposes indigenous, while the Nùng are relatively recent migrants from China.

1 Holm and Meng (forthcoming).

The Nùng are mostly speakers of Southern Zhuang dialects from the southwestern part of Guangxi or eastern Yunnan, and in Vietnam the various sub-groups are often referred to by their places of origin in China. Thus the Nùng An come from Long'an 隆安 county in west-central Guangxi, the Nùng Chau come from Longzhou 龍州 in the far southwest, and the Nùng Fanh Sling come from the former chieftaincy of Wancheng 萬承 in present-day Tiandeng 天等 county. The languages they speak are distinct from each other, even if there is often a certain degree of mutual intelligibility.² Their vernacular scripts are also different from each other, and different also from the Tày vernacular script.

One of the provinces in which I conducted my earliest fieldwork in Vietnam was Cao Bằng 高平, a mountainous province more or less directly north of Hanoi, just south of the border with China. This is an area which until quite recently had an overwhelming majority population of Tai speakers, both Tày and Nùng, but also some other groups. One of the most intriguing of these other groups was a group called the Ngạn, who are now officially classified by the Vietnamese government as a 'local sub-group' of the more populous Tày. The classification itself was anomalous, and perhaps a sign that the Ngạn would be worth investigating.

The Ngạn were said to be descendants of a group of mercenary soldiers who were hired as bodyguards for the Mạc 莫 royal court during the time when the Mạc dynasty had its seat of government in Cao Bằng, during the 16th and 17th centuries. The men were said to be sturdily built, and good at hunting and the martial arts. Their settlements were distributed along the main roads along which the Mạc royal retinue travelled from its citadel in present-day Hòa An district through the mountains to the east. The Ngạn were first mentioned in a report dated 1908 by the French commandant of the 2nd Military District (Cao Bằng), Major Leblond, and were reported to be a brave people renowned for their marksmanship, who lived along the packhorse route between the provincial seat of Cao Bằng and Quảng Uyên to the east.³ The Ngạn population was relatively small. In Vietnam there are a number of different accounts of where the Ngạn people came from. The one most often cited is that they came from Guizhou province in China.⁴

² A similar mixture of Southern Zhuang speakers from various localities is found on the other side of the border, in the counties just to the north. For details see Holm 2010. An extensive wordlist of several of these speech forms is given on pp. 41–58.

³ Hoàng Văn Ma 2009, 318.

⁴ Ty văn hóa Cao Bằng 1963, 46–47, quoted in Hoàng Văn Ma 2009, 320–321. The above source was a draft history of Cao Bằng province compiled by the provincial Cultural Department in the 1960s.

At any rate I included the Ngạn in my research plan, along with visits to Nùng An and Tày villages in the same general area. My visits were preliminary visits to selected village communities, with the aim of recording basic vocabularies from a range of different speakers, both male and female, but were also more specifically targeted at religious practitioners with ritual texts, with the aim of recording recitations of ritual texts by their traditional owners (the priests), and conducting follow-up investigations on the meaning of words, phrases, and longer chunks of text. For the Ngạn, I visited a village community in Phi Hải commune in Quảng Uyên district, some 40 kilometres to the east of the Cao Bằng provincial city. A preliminary visit was made in February 2015, and a follow-up visit took place in August of the same year.

2 Mogong and their rituals

It was during the second stay that I visited the home of Mr. Hòang, a mogong priest, and recorded his recitation of a ritual to call back the vital spirits of a sick person.

Before going into a detailed description of the ritual itself, a couple points need clarification. Mogong 麽公 is the name in Chinese (Zhuang *bouxmo*) for male ritual practitioners who conduct Tai-style text-based rituals, with texts written in a vernacular script recited in the local language. Mogong are found not only among the Zhuang, Bouyei, and other Tai-speaking groups in China, but also very widely across mainland Southeast Asia.⁵ Similar practitioners (*mo*) are also found among the Dai in Sipsong Panna in southernmost Yunnan, but there their ritual texts are written in an Indic script. Mogong rituals may be small-scale, conducted by single priests for individual households, or may be larger-scale rituals conducted on behalf of communities, or in former times on behalf of the chiefly lineage and the welfare of the domain. The core of these rituals is the recitation of a sacred text, rather than sacred dances, *mudrās*, and other ritual manipulations ('methods') as practiced by Buddhist and Daoist priests.

A very common type of mogong ritual was the recalling of vital spirits ('souls') that had gone astray. Among the Tày at least, there were held to be twelve such vital spirits (*khwan*). Throughout much of the far south of China, but also in Thailand and Laos, there was a view that the vital energies of human

5 See Holm 2017, 173–189.

beings, animals, and even plant crops could easily leave their bodies and take flight, leading to loss of energy, illness or even death. There was a range of rituals performed by mogong to address this: there were texts for the recall of the souls of rice, buffaloes, chickens and ducks, fish, and also human beings. The function of such rituals was to locate the lost souls, bring them back, and re-install them in the body.⁶ It is worth noting that mogong in Guangxi recite their ritual texts based on a version that they learnt by heart, orally and usually at an early age, rather than on the basis of a literal reading of the text. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as ‘performative literacy’. It turns out that Mr. Hòang’s recitation also was based on a similar mechanism.⁷ Apart from liturgical manuscripts, recited during the conduct of rituals, Mr Hòang had other manuscripts in his possession. Among these was a family register handed down in Mr Hòang’s family (Fig. 1). This was a Chinese-style *jiapu* 家譜, written in Chinese. This stated clearly that the family came from a village in Tianzhou (Fig. 2).



Fig. 1: Cover of Mr Hòang’s family register.

⁶ See Holm 2004.

⁷ What this means is that such texts alone, abstracted from their original social and performative context or taken from their traditional owners, cannot be used as a guide to their use in society and culture, or even their meaning on the lexical level.

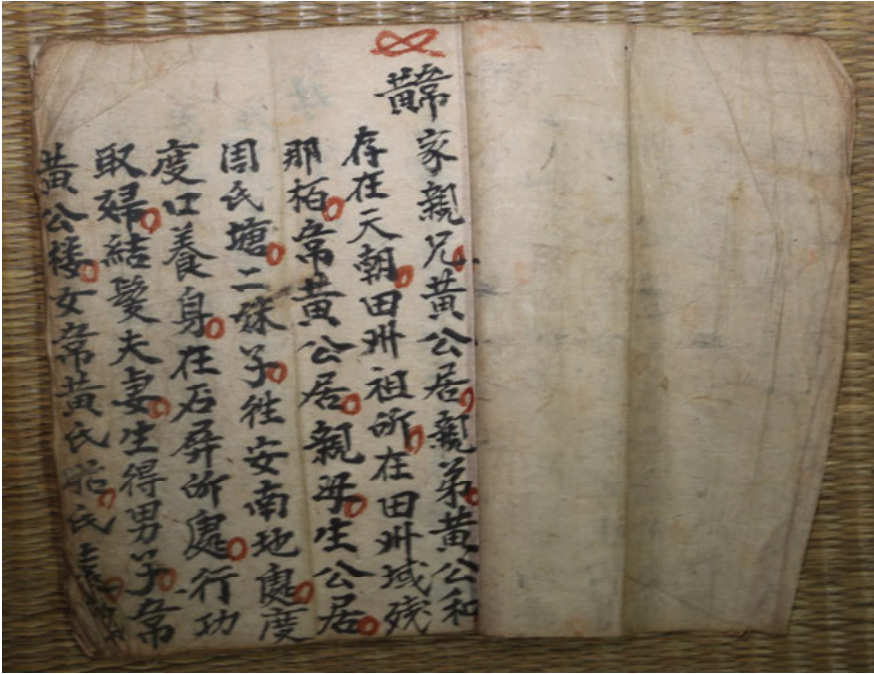


Fig. 2: First page of Mr Hòang's family register, showing reference to Tianzhou 田州 (second line).

3 The recitation

The recitation was conducted by Mr Hòang in the main room of his house, a traditional house made of wooden planking and bamboo with the living quarters elevated above ground level. The main room was also where the family's ancestral altar was located. A small square table was set up facing the ancestral altar, and offerings of flowers, a bowl containing uncooked glutinous rice, and various ritual paraphernalia – a small hand bell and a wooden 'thunder block' of the kind used by Daoist priests – were placed there in readiness. The words of the ritual are held to be the words of the ancestors, and here at least people held to the belief that the words of the ritual could not be recited outside their ritual context without incurring displeasure and punishment from the ancestors and other spirits. Performance of the ritual would also require a gift of money, placed inside an envelope and put on the altar table along with the other offerings.

Mr Hòang opened the ritual proceedings by banging the thunder block on the offerings table and ringing the small hand-bell, said to be done in order to attract the attention of the spirits, and usher them down into the ritual space. He then began his recitation of the text, which took the form of a chant, unaccompanied by any musical instruments. During this recitation, he sat cross-legged in front of the altar table, with the ritual manuscript in front of him, turning the pages at more or less the right time (Fig. 3). After the recitation, there was a short procedural segment, during which the returning vital spirits of the sick person were cemented in place. I was then allowed to photograph the manuscript, and conduct a short follow-up interview with Mr Hòang.



Fig. 3: Mr Hòang prepares for the recitation.

The manuscript Mr Hòang used for the ritual recitation was a small thread-bound volume, measuring roughly 11 cm each side, with character text written in columns Chinese-style from right to left (Fig. 4). In the same volume there were other sections containing ritual texts, Chinese-style astrological tables, and illustrations of human bodies and faces. There was not enough time to ask Mr Hòang about any of these matters.

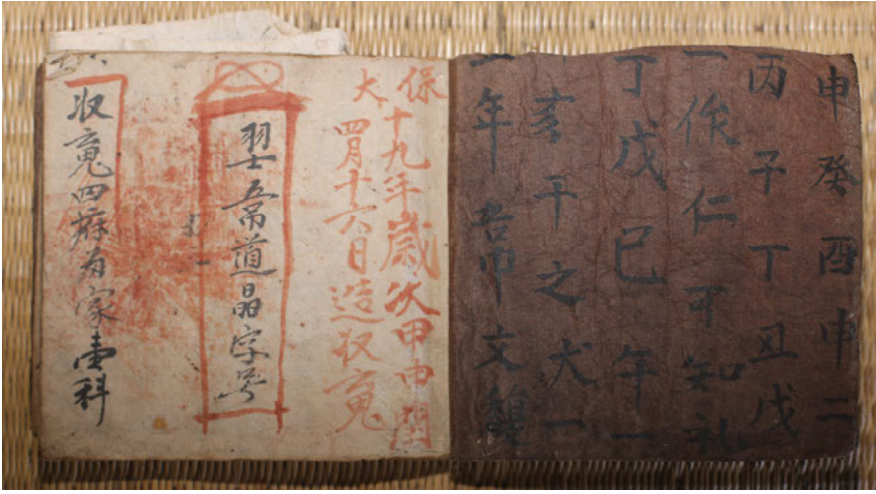


Fig. 4: Title page of Mr Hòang's ritual manuscript.

4 The ritual text

After a preliminary analysis of both the manuscript itself and Mr Hòang's recitation, there are a number of unanswered questions, both at the lexical level (the meaning of individual words) and at the broader ethnographic level. At 244 lines, this ritual segment is relatively short. Still, preparation of an interlinear version of the text allows us to make a preliminary analysis.

First, and at the most obvious level, the formulaic lines at the beginning of the text did indeed conform to the pattern found in mogong texts from the Tianzhou region in west-central Guangxi. What follows are the first four lines of Mr Hòang's text:⁸

三	盖	三	皇	住	1
ʃa:m ¹	ka:i ⁵	ʃa:m ¹	va:ŋ ²	ɕu: ⁵	3a:1
three	world	three	king	establish	

The Three Realms were established by the Three Kings,

⁸ In the second line, giving the pronunciation transcribed in IPA, I give tone categories (numbers 1–8) for each word, but no tone flags. The recitation was chanted, rather than spoken. Actual tone values will have to be ascertained during follow-up investigations in the field.

四	盖	四	皇	造	2
ti: ⁵	ka:i ⁵	ti: ⁵	va:ŋ ²	leu: ⁴	
four	world	four	king	create	
<i>The Four Realms were created by the Four Kings.</i>					
皇	造	立	造	連	3
va:ŋ ²	ca:u ⁴	lep ^{m7}	ca:u ⁴	lien ²	3a:2
king	create	darkness	create	light	
<i>The Kings made the darkness and made the light,</i>					
皇	造	天	造	地	4
va:ŋ ²	ca:u ⁴	tien ¹	ca:u ⁴	ti: ⁶	
king	create	heaven	create	earth	
<i>The Kings made Heaven and made the Earth.</i>					

If we compare these opening lines with the opening lines of the Hanvueng ritual text from southern Bama county, north of Tianzhou, we find:

三	盖	三	王	至。	1
ʃa:m↓	ka:i↓	ʃa:m↓	βuəŋ↓	ci:↓	
sam	gaiq	sam	vuengz	ciq	
three	world	three	king	establish	
<i>The Three Realms were established by the Three Kings,</i>					
四	盖	四	王	造。	2
ʃi:↓	ka:i↓	ʃi:↓	βuəŋ↓	ca:u↓	
sei q	gaiq	sei q	vuengz	caux	
four	world	four	king	create	
<i>The Four Realms were created by the Four Kings.</i>					
王	造	立	造	連。	3
βuəŋ↓	ca:u↓	lep↓	ca:u↓	li:n ↓	
vuengz	caux	laep	caux	lien z	
king	create	darkness	create	light	
<i>The Kings made the darkness and made the light,</i>					
王	造	天	造	地。	4
βuəŋ↓	ca:u↓	tien↓	ca:u↓	ti: ↓	
vuengz	caux	dien	caux	deih	
king	create	heaven	create	earth	
<i>The Kings made Heaven and made the Earth.</i>					

Apart from some minor differences in written representation and pronunciation, the lines are identical. These lines opening the ritual mark the transition from mundane speech to sacred speech. They are cosmogonic in nature: they provide a succinct account of the beginnings of the world which human beings inhabit.

Mr Hông's text for recalling vital spirits goes on to narrate the creation of families, springs (water sources), fish, and so on. Other mogong texts go on to narrate the origins of other entities, depending on the focus of the ritual.¹³ In the case of the Hanvueng text, which is recited at rituals to quell intractable family quarrels, the text goes on to tell of the origins of the Demons of Enmity.¹⁴

This particular formulaic opening in mogong texts is found in texts from the area of Tianzhou, on the northern bank of the Youjiang River.¹⁵ It is not found elsewhere – further to the north, even nearby in Donglan 東蘭, and so far has not been found either in other parts of Guangxi, eastern Yunnan, or Guizhou.¹⁶

5 The Ngạn script

Overall, the vernacular script used in this manuscript is of the same pattern as the scripts from the Tianzhou area, and is quite different from the vernacular script of the Tày. Clear differences can also be seen between the Ngạn script and Nùng scripts. A quick overview can be obtained by looking at the Appendix, which lists the most common graphic representations of the 60 common words used in our survey of the traditional Zhuang character scripts (Table 2). In the table, Bama (BM) represents the Tianzhou scripts, the Cao Bằng marriage songs (CBMS) represent Tày, and Cao Bằng Nùng (CBN) represents an example of a Nùng Giang script.

In this short ritual text only 48 out of the 60 common words are found, but that still allows us to draw up a preliminary profile. In the case of two morphemes, we have two graphs that are equally common, so that makes a total of 50 exemplars altogether. We can compare the graphic renderings of these common words in the Ngạn manuscript with those found in Guangxi, Guizhou, Yunnan, and northern Vietnam. Full information about the overall distribution of each of the graphs in the survey is found in the relevant sections of Part 2 in

¹³ See the examples in Texts 1–12 in Holm 2004.

¹⁴ Holm and Meng 2015, 51–53 (English translation), 91–99 (interlinear text), and 286–295 (textual and ethnographic notes) (lines 13–76 respectively).

¹⁵ See especially the twelve mogong ritual texts included in Holm 2004.

¹⁶ Our survey of Zhuang and Bouyei manuscripts from 45 locations included mogong texts from all these areas. For discussion see Holm 2013. I say ‘so far’ because our survey was far from exhaustive, and there may well be other pockets of similar mogong manuscripts in other localities.

Holm 2013. Overall, we can classify the graphs in the Ngạn text in the following categories:¹⁷

- A. The same graph or a graph in the same semantic-phonetic series is dominant in Tianzhou:
32 examples (2, 4, 5, 7, 11, 12, 13, 14, 17, 18a, 21, 24, 26, 28, 29, 31, 32, 33, 34, 36, 38, 39, 40, 44, 50, 51, 52, 55, 57, 58, 59, 60)
- B. A different graph or graphic series is dominant in Tianzhou, but the Ngạn graph is also found:
11 examples (18b, 22, 30, 33b, 35, 37, 42, 43, 53, 54, 56)
- C. The graph is not found in Tianzhou but found elsewhere in the Zhuang-Bouyei area:
4 examples (15, 46, 47, 49)
- D. Local innovations:
4 examples (6, 23, 40, 48)
- E. Borrowings from the Tày vernacular script:
1 definite example (3), and two possible examples (37, 53)

Taking the first two categories together gives us a total of 43 graphs out of 50, or 86% commonality between the Ngạn script and that of Tianzhou. This is a relatively high percentage, given that the migration of the Ngạn people is said to have taken place in the 16th and 17th centuries. Manuscripts from within the Tianzhou area in any case evince a degree of commonality of 87.5% at the highest but an average more like 79%.¹⁸ By comparison, the degree of commonality in the Tày vernacular script over a much wider area – several Vietnamese provinces – is somewhat higher.¹⁹

The Tianzhou system itself exhibits only a low level of correlation with manuscripts from Guizhou.²⁰ For the Ngạn script, the percentages of commonality with Guizhou manuscripts are even lower.²¹ Low percentages like this are an indication of separate origins of script varieties and subsequent lack of social interaction at the local level. While the number of Guizhou manuscripts surveyed thus far is on the low side, and this evidence could be deemed insufficient, nevertheless it

¹⁷ The numbers below correspond to the items listed in the Appendix (Table 2).

¹⁸ For discussion see Holm 2013, 746–748 and Map 61.1.

¹⁹ On which see Holm 2020, 202–203.

²⁰ The percentages are 15.1% for Zhenning, 15.2% for Ceheng, and 27.3% for Libo. See Holm 2013, Map 61.1.

²¹ The percentages are 6.7% for Zhenning, 3.6% for Ceheng, and 23.4% for Libo. These calculations are based on the number of possible matches with the relevant entries in Holm 2013, 814–825 (Appendix 3, ‘The Most Common Representations of Common Words’).

appears as if there is no evidence here of any connection between the Ngạn and a hypothetical Guizhou homeland, as suggested by Vietnamese sources.

The question of borrowings from the Tày script is made somewhat more complicated by the fact that the Tày script has quite a few characters in common with the Zhuang script of the Xijiang 西江 (West River) area in central Guangxi, including Tianzhou. Overall, the Tày script has around 30% in common with Zhuang scripts north of the border, along with around 70% in a more recent stratum dating from around the 17th century that is quite different from the Zhuang scripts.²² The Tày script of Lạng Sơn has more of these graphs in common with Zhuang than the Tày vernacular script of Cao Bằng. In the analysis here, I have identified one clear case of borrowing from the Tày script into the Ngạn script in our list of 60 common words. Other graphs Zhuang and Ngạn have in common with Tày are:

16 examples (2, 5, 7, 12, 14, 17, 31, 33b, 37, 40, 44, 51, 53, 54, 57, 58)

Whether or not any of these other graphs are seen locally as Tày borrowings is a matter for further investigation. At any rate, it should not be surprising that the Ngạn have borrowed graphic usages from the Tày, living in an environment in which Tày is the lingua franca. Social interaction and text borrowing over decades and centuries would naturally result in texts which show the traces of these interactions.

Table 1: Discussion of specific examples.²³

	Zhuang	Ngạn	commentary
2	<i>aeu</i>	歐	dominant in Tianzhou, Mashan and Wuming, but also found over a wide area from Liuzhou in the east to Napo in the SW, and in eastern Yunnan (EY) and Cao Bằng; found in Libo in Guizhou but not further north (for map see Holm 2013, 100).
3	<i>bae</i>	悲	borrowed from Tày. Found in the graphic systems of the marriage songs of Cao Bằng and Lạng Sơn, and also Tianbao in SW Guangxi. Not found elsewhere in Guangxi or Guizhou (map 3.1 in Holm 2013, 110). The graph here has been simplified by removal of 去 <i>qù</i> ‘to go’ on the right-hand side. The graphs 𪗇 and 𪗈, both graphs common in Tày manuscripts, are also found in the Ngạn text, though in smaller numbers.

²² See Holm 2020, 203–205.

²³ NE = north-eastern Guangxi; EC = east-central Guangxi; CN = central-northern Guangxi.

	Zhuang	Ngạn	commentary
4	<i>baenz</i>	分	graphic series dominant in Tianzhou, with distribution similar to (2) <i>aeu</i> . Most common graph in Tianzhou is 貧 <i>pín</i> 'poor', but 分 <i>fēn</i> 'to divide' is also found. Found east as far as Guiping in eastern Guangxi (map 4.1 in Holm 2013, 124). 貧 is also found in the Ngạn manuscript.
5	<i>bak</i>	百	graphic series found in Tianzhou, Mashan, and other areas (map 5.1 in Holm 2013, 134). 𠂇, with a MOUTH radical, is the dominant graph in the areas covered by the Tianzhou and Si'en chieftaincies and in other Cen domains; here the Ngạn graph represents a simplification.
6	<i>bi</i>	𠂇	<i>Pí</i> 皮 'skin' is not found elsewhere as a phonetic component. See map 6.1 in Holm 2013, 146. The graph here is likely to be a local innovation.
7	<i>boux</i>	甫	most common graph in Tianzhou, Wuming, Libo, Tianlin, and Cao Bằng Tây (map 7.1 in Holm 2013, 154).
11	<i>daeuj</i>	斗	most common graph everywhere (map 11.1 in Holm 2013, 202).
12	<i>dawz</i>	提	found in 31 locations including Tianzhou (map 12.1 in Holm 2013, 210)
13	<i>de</i>	他	found in 26 locations including Tianzhou, the NE, and EC Guangxi (map 13.1 in Holm 2013, 222)
14	<i>dox</i>	度	found in the Tianzhou area, Mashan, and east as far as Guiping (map 14.1 in Holm 2013, 230)
15	<i>duz</i>	度	found in Huanjiang in the north and Xichou in eastern Yunnan; Tianzhou mostly has 𠂇 <i>tú</i> (map 15.1 in Holm 2013, 240)
17	<i>faex</i>	𠂇	10 locations, including Tianzhou, the north, the SW, and northern Vietnam; represents the pronunciation <i>mai</i> ⁴ (map 17.1 in Holm 2013, 264).
18a	<i>gaiq</i>	盖	dominant in the Tianzhou area, found in 11 locations (map 18.1 in Holm 2013, 276)
18b		鷄	found in Tiandong, Mashan, and Pingguo.
21	<i>gou</i>	古	common along with 故 <i>gù</i> in Tianzhou, also in north (map 21.1 in Holm 2013, 304)
22	<i>guh</i>	國	found in 8 locations including Tianzhou, Guiping, and Tianlin; dominant graph in Tianzhou is 郭 <i>guō</i> (map 22.1 in Holm 2013, 312)
23	<i>gwn</i>	𠂇	斤 <i>jīn</i> not found elsewhere as a phonetic component (map 23.1 in Holm 2013, 326). This is likely to be a local innovation.
24	<i>gwnz</i>	志	found in 11 locations, especially Tianzhou but also east as far as Laibin (map 21.1 in Holm 2013, 304)
26	<i>haemh</i>	舍	series based on 含 <i>hán</i> , widespread and dominant in Tianzhou (map 26.1 in Holm 2013, 356)
28	<i>haeuj</i>	口	found in 19 locations, widespread in EC and Guiping as well as Tianzhou (map 28.1 p. 373)
29	<i>haeux</i>	𠂇	found in 13 locations, mainly in Tianzhou but also Mashan, Shanglin and central north (map 29.1 in Holm 2013, 383)

	Zhuang	Ngan	commentary
30	<i>hauq</i>	嘢	series found in Tiandong, Tianyang song, Mashan, and the north; series based on 毛 <i>máo</i> is dominant in Tianzhou (map 30.1 in Holm 2013, 394)
31	<i>hawj</i>	許	found in 20 locations, in Tianzhou but also EC, CN, eastern Yunnan and northern Vietnam (map 31.1 in Holm 2013, 402)
32	<i>hwnj</i>	恩	widespread, and dominant in Tianzhou; series has 15 variant graphs (map 31.1 in Holm 2013, 402)
33a	<i>lai</i>	賴	widespread, series with 9 variants in 11 locations including Tianzhou (map 32.1 in Holm 2013, 426)
33b		来	found in 11 locations including 3 in Tianzhou
34	<i>laj</i>	恣	found in 12 locations, dominant in Tianzhou (map 34.1 in Holm 2013, 436)
35	<i>lawz</i>	吕	series is found in 3 locations: Mashan, Funing and Guiping; in Tianzhou 黎 <i>lí</i> is dominant (map 35.1 in Holm 2013, 446)
36	<i>lwg</i>	力	Series dominant in Tianzhou, also found in Mashan, EC, CN, and Guiping (map 36.1 in Holm 2013, 464)
37	<i>ma</i>	麻	series found in 17 locations, including Tianzhou; in Tianzhou 馬 <i>mǎ</i> is dominant (map 37.1 in Holm 2013, 472). The graph 麻 is a vernacular variant of 麻 <i>má</i> , particularly common in Vietnam.
38	<i>mbouj</i>	不	found in 28 locations including Tianzhou, and as far east as Guiping (map 38.1 in Holm 2013, 480)
39	<i>mbwn</i>	閔	series dominant in Tianzhou, with 12 graphic variants in 19 locations (map 39.1 in Holm 2013, 494)
40	<i>miz</i>	眉	series dominant in Tianzhou, and widespread elsewhere (map 40.1 in Holm 2013, 504). The Ngan graph 眉 represents a form of 眉 <i>méi</i> with a COWRY radical replacing the normal EYE radical. The two are graphically similar. This seems to be a local innovation.
42	<i>naeuz</i>	丑	found in Bose as well as Napo in the SW, and Yishan and Luocheng in the NE (map 42.1 in Holm 2013, 524). The actual basis of the phonetic borrowing is 扭 <i>niǔ</i> ‘to twist’, 紐 <i>niǔ</i> ‘knot’, or another graph in the same graphic series.
43	<i>ndaej</i>	得	a semantic borrowing found in 14 locations, including Tianzhou; in Tianzhou 礼 <i>lǐ</i> is mostly dominant (map 43.1 in Holm 2013, 536)
44	<i>ndang</i>	𪗇	variant of 𪗇, a common Zhuang graph for <i>ndang</i> found in 20 locations; dominant in Tianzhou but also in Mashan, Wuming, CN, SW and northern Vietnam (map 44.1 in Holm 2013, 546)
46	<i>ndei</i>	黎	found in the SW and in Cao Bằng Nùng; 利 <i>lì</i> dominant in Tianzhou (map 46.1 in Holm 2013, 568)
47	<i>ndeui</i>	刁	found in 4 locations in eastern Guangxi (map 47.1 in Holm 2013, 580)
48	<i>ndwen</i>	胆	not found elsewhere; the dominant form in Tianzhou is 脾, with 年 <i>nián</i> as the phonetic element (map 48.1 in Holm 2013, 592). The 且 <i>qiě</i> element on the right-hand side may be a graphic substitution for 旦 <i>dàn</i> ; the

	Zhuang	Ngạn	commentary
			graphs 吞 <i>tūn</i> and 脰 are found for <i>ndwen</i> in Tianzhou and Funing in eastern Yunnan.
49	<i>neix</i>	女	found in Tianlin and Bose (northwestern locations); dominant in Tianzhou is 你 <i>nĩ</i> , found in 26 locations (map 49.1 in Holm 2013, 604)
50	<i>ngoenz</i>	𠂔	most common form, found in 13 locations and dominant in Tianzhou (map 50.1 in Holm 2013, 614)
51	<i>ok</i>	屋	most common form, found in 14 locations and dominant in Tianzhou (map 51.1 in Holm 2013, 624)
52	<i>ra</i>	𠂔	various forms of 羅 <i>luó</i> are dominant in Tianzhou but also east as far as Guiping (map 52.1 in Holm 2013, 634). 𠂔 is a vernacular simplification of 羅 <i>luó</i> common in texts throughout Guangxi and northern Vietnam.
53	<i>raemx</i>	淦	most common form, found in 17 locations; 淋 <i>lín</i> series is more dominant in Tianzhou (map 53.1 in Holm 2013, 646)
54	<i>raen</i>	吞	6 variants found in 14 locations; 吞 found in the EC: Laibin, Shanglin, Xincheng, Mashan, and Guiping; 忻 <i>xīn</i> dominant in Tianzhou (map 54.1 in Holm 2013, 656)
55	<i>ranz</i>	𠂔	vernacular variant of 蘭 <i>lán</i> ; series dominant in Tianzhou and most common graphic series; character subject to various radical simplifications (map 55.1 in Holm 2013, 668; see also pp. 672–673). The ‘diacritical marks’ on either side of the central graphic elements are a cursive (‘grass hand’) rendering of 门 <i>mén</i> ‘doorway’. ²⁴
56	<i>roengz</i>	𠂔	most common series, found in 24+ locations with 17 graphic variants; 隆 <i>lóng</i> dominant in Tianzhou (map 56.1 in Holm 2013, 682); the Ngạn graph 𠂔 is a vernacular variant of 𠂔 <i>lǒng</i> .
57	<i>rox</i>	鲁	most common representation, dominant in Tianzhou and also EC, Guiping, Napo, and northern Vietnam (Lạng Sơn Tây) (map 57.1 in Holm 2013, 694)
58	<i>vaiz</i>	𠂔	dominant in Tianzhou, though in varying simplified graphic forms (explained in Holm 2013, 713–715); this variant found in 8 locations, represents a radically simplified form of 懷 <i>huái</i> (map 51.1 in Holm 2013, 710).
59	<i>vunz</i>	𠂔	found in 23 locations and dominant in Tianzhou (map 59.1 in Holm 2013, 718)
60	<i>youq</i>	𠂔	series dominant in Tianzhou, as well as Mashan, Laibin and the SW (map 60.1 in Holm 2013, 728); this variant of 幼 (幼) with the SILK radical on the left is also found in manuscripts from Tianzhou. ²⁵

²⁴ For similar examples see Furutani 2001, 717.

²⁵ See Liang Tingwang 2009 for the *Chang Tangwang* 唱唐王, a novel in verse from Sitangzhen 四塘鎮 in Bose.

Analysis of the Ngạn material in comparison with texts from Bose, Tianyang, Bama and Tiandong allows us to identify the following graphs as borrowings from the Tày script: (3) *bae*, and possibly also (37) *ma*, and (53) *raemx*. The borrowing indicates a certain level of interaction with the wider society within which the Ngạn found themselves. This could be a result of text borrowing or text stealing from local mogong, or broader exposure to the Tày script. All the other graphs except for one or two are well attested in the Zhuang scripts of the Youjiang area. The one or two exceptions are likely to be local innovations.

Traditional manuscripts from the Youjiang area also show signs of readings based not on the local spoken dialect or lingua franca, but on dialects from both northern Guangxi or the Bouyei areas and from the southern Central Tai areas. I have shown that such traces can be linked with past historical events and with patterns of mobility and migration.²⁶ Local people including the priest may have forgotten such connections, or not recognise the lexical items or pronunciations as exotic, but their recitations and the way the manuscript text is written bears the traces of them.

For this reason, it is not surprising to find traces of script borrowing and possibly also forms of adaptation in Ngạn manuscripts in Vietnam.

6 Conclusions

- (a) The recitation of the text indicates that the language of the Ngạn shows very clear characteristics of the Youjiang sub-dialect of Northern Zhuang, including affricated initial consonants (e.g. *tœu*³ rather than *kjeu*³ for ‘head’), tone values very close to those found in the Youjiang River area, and basic spoken vocabulary close to that of Northern Zhuang in the same area, with some admixture of Tày borrowings;
- (b) both the format of the text-based mogong recitation and the details of the vernacular script itself show a clear linkage with the mogong recitations from Tianzhou, again with some admixture of Tày borrowings in both ritual vocabulary and graphic usage;
- (c) the family register of the Hông family states specifically that their ancestor came from Tianzhou.

²⁶ Holm 2015, 1–32.

The mogong manuscript discussed here is in basically the same format as the mogong manuscripts we have analysed in previous publications.²⁷ All these ritual texts begin with the same formulaic introduction, and are written and performed in five-syllable lines of verse exhibiting canonical parallelism. Poetics and parallelism of this kind are a general feature of Zhuang ritual texts and song texts across a very wide area, but thus far the same formulaic opening has been found only in mogong texts from the area of Tianyang, Bama, Bose, and Tiandong counties, in the former area governed by the Tianzhou chieftaincy. Mogong texts from the southern parishes of Donglan county, just to the north, lack this formulaic opening and show quite a different style; this area was a part of Donglan, a different native chiefly domain, during the pre-modern period.

On the other hand, there are close parallels with the Ngạn brigands' song lyrics and the song culture of present-day Pingguo and Tiandong counties further east along the Youjiang River, to the east of Tianzhou. It is possible of course that the Ngạn people came from a number of different localities within the Youjiang River region. By analogy, there are reportedly four different sub-groups of the Nùng An people in Quảng Uyên district east of Cao Bằng,²⁸ so this may also possibly be the situation with the Ngạn.

The historical context of the arrival of the Ngạn people, or at least the contingent who served as a force of elite troops guarding the Mạc royal court, is in need of further clarification. The Mạc had their capital in Cao Bằng for a period of over 70 years, from 1601 to 1677.²⁹ The overall military history of this period, and the general pattern of administration at the court and in the territories under their control, is reasonably well-documented, as is their policy of fostering education and holding relatively frequent imperial examinations and recruiting successful graduates into their service,³⁰ but more specific detail about military organisation is needed. It may be also that further fieldwork in the area will turn up local documents, including family registers, that might shed light on these matters.

²⁷ Holm 2004, Holm and Meng 2015.

²⁸ David Holm, fieldwork, Quảng Uyên district, February and August 2015.

²⁹ See especially *Lịch sử Tỉnh Cao Bằng* 2009, 274–287 (Chapter IV Part III 'Nhà Mạc ở Cao Bằng').

³⁰ On which see Niu Kaijun 2000, 46.

Acknowledgements

Research on which this article was based was supported by an Australian Research Council-funded large grant project on The Old Zhuang Script, 1996–1999. Subsequent support came from a research grant from the Science Council of Taiwan (MOST) from 2011 to 2017, project title ‘Vernacular Character Writing Systems among the Tai-speaking Peoples of Southwest China and Northern Vietnam’ (grant nos. 102-2410-H-004-055–, 103-2410-H-004-111–, and 104-2410-H-004-162–).

In Guangxi my principal collaborator over many years has been Professor Meng Yuanyao of the Guangxi University for Nationalities. My other long-time research associate was the late Ling Shudong, formerly Deputy Director of the Zhuang Ethnological Museum in Jingxi. In Vietnam my chief collaborator has been Professor Trần Trí Dõi of the National University for Humanities and Social Sciences Hanoi. Many thanks are due to him and my research assistant Bui Hai Binh for their invaluable assistance.

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Appendix:

Common Words in Ngạn, Zhuang, Tày and Nùng

Manuscript codes:

BM	manuscript from Yandong 燕洞 parish in Bama county (Holm 2013, 801)
CBNG	manuscript from Phi Hải commune, Quảng Uyên district, Cao Bằng
CBMS	Cao Bằng marriage songs (Holm 2013, 812)
CBN	Cao Bằng Nùng mogong manuscript, Trà Lĩnh district, Cao Bằng (Holm 2013, 812)

Notes:

- Two characters listed indicates that they were found in equal numbers.
- A hyphen (-) indicates that no example of the word was found in the requisite manuscript.
- Ngạn transcription is taken from Hoàng Thị Quỳnh Nha 2003, 15–40.

Table 2: Common Words in Ngạn, Zhuang, Tày and Nùng.

	Zhuang	gloss	Ngạn	Tày	BM	CBNg	CBMS	CBN
1	<i>aen</i> (ʔan ¹)	clf. for objects	ắn	ắn	恩	-	唉	个
2	<i>aeu</i> (ʔau ¹)	to take	ău	au	歐	歐	幼	獸
3	<i>bae</i> (pai ¹)	to go	păy	pây	批	悲	黠	匏
4	<i>baenz</i> (pan ²)	to accomplish	păn	păn	貧	分	边	貧
5	<i>bak</i> (ʔba:k ²)	mouth	pác	pác	𠵹	百	𠵹	𠵹
6	<i>bi</i> (pi: ¹)	year	pỉ	pi	脾	𢇛	𢇛	年
7	<i>boux</i> (pou ⁴)	clf. for people	pù	pú	甫	甫	希	希
8	<i>cam</i> (ɕa:m ¹)	to ask	sam	sam	嗲	-	咁	尋
9	<i>coenz</i> (ɕœn ²)	clf., sentence	sòn	căm	𠵹	-	吟	-
10	<i>daengz</i> (teŋ ²)	to arrive	tăng	thăng	滕	-	汨	塋
11	<i>daeuj</i> (teu ³)	to come	táu	-	斗	斗	-	𠵹
12	<i>dawz</i> (tew ²)	to take in hand	căm	thur, căm	提	提	書 拎	提
13	<i>de</i> (tɛ: ¹)	he, she, it	tẻ	mìn	他	他	俛	-
14	<i>dox</i> (to: ⁴)	each other	tò	căn	度	度	根	同
15	<i>duz</i> (tu: ²)	clf. animals	tua	tua	𠵹	度	湏	-
16	<i>dwk</i> (tuw ²)	to hit	tức	tức	得	-	-	打
17	<i>faex</i> (fai ⁴)	tree	mây	mạy	株	榎	榎	株
18	<i>gaiq</i> (ka:i ⁵)	clf.; this, that	cái	cái	盖	盖 鷄	-	-
19	<i>gangj</i> (ka:ŋ ³)	to speak	cáng	căng	講	-	𠵹	-
20	<i>gonq</i> (ko:n ⁵)	before	cón	cón	貫	-	羣	官
21	<i>gou</i> (kou ¹)	I, me	củ	ngò	故	古	-	-
22	<i>guh</i> (ku: ⁶)	to do	cuộc	hât	郭	國	𠵹	乞
23	<i>gwn</i> (kwn ¹)	to eat	củn	kin	𠵹	𠵹	𠵹	𠵹
24	<i>gwnz</i> (kwn ²)	above, on	cữn	nưa	𠵹	𠵹	𠵹	𠵹
25	<i>gyaeuj</i> (kjeu ³)	head	cháu	hua	九	-	-	-
26	<i>haemh</i> (hem ⁶)	evening	hăm	khăm	𠵹	𠵹	-	-
27	<i>haet</i> (het ⁷)	morning	hắt	nâư	𠵹	-	-	-
28	<i>haeuj</i> (hau ³)	to enter	háu	khẩu	口	口	𠵹	-
29	<i>haeux</i> (hau ⁴)	rice	hẩu	khẩu	𠵹	𠵹	𠵹	𠵹
30	<i>hauq</i> (ha:u ⁵)	speech	háo	kháo	𠵹	𠵹	-	-
31	<i>hawj</i> (hew ³)	to give	hấu	hấu	𠵹	𠵹	𠵹	𠵹
32	<i>hwnj</i> (hwn ³)	to ascend	hứn	khỉn	𠵹	𠵹	𠵹	𠵹
33	<i>lai</i> (la:i ¹)	much, many	lải	lai	𠵹	𠵹 来	来	-
34	<i>laj</i> (la: ³)	below	lá	tẩu	𠵹	𠵹	𠵹	-

	Zhuang	gloss	Ngạn	Tày	BM	CBNg	CBMS	CBN
35	<i>lawz</i> (lew ²)	which	lầu	rầu	黎	吕	芦	-
36	<i>lwg</i> (luk ⁸)	child	lực	lực	力	力	狄	狄
37	<i>ma</i> (ma: ¹)	to come back	mà	mà	瑪	麻	麻	康
38	<i>mbouj</i> (?bou ³)	not	bo, bô	bầu	不	不	保	否
39	<i>mbwn</i> (?bwn ¹)	heaven, sky	bủn	bân	霄	闵	紆	奔
40	<i>miz</i> (mi: ²)	to have	mì	mì	眉	眞	眉	眉
41	<i>mwngz</i> (muŋ ²)	you	mừng	mầu	明	-	-	-
42	<i>naeuz</i> (neu ²)	to say	nàu	cạ	嚙	丑	訇	-
43	<i>ndaej</i> (?dei ³)	to get	đày	đáy	礼	得	帝	礼
44	<i>ndang</i> (?da:n ¹)	body	đảng	đang	𪔐	𪔐	身	𪔐
45	<i>ndaw</i> (?dew ¹)	inside	đầu	đầu	内	-	𪔐	伊
46	<i>ndei</i> (?dei ¹)	good	đĩ	đây	俐	黎	低	黎
47	<i>ndeui</i> (?de:u ¹)	one	đêu	đeo	吊	刁	刀	-
48	<i>ndwen</i> (?dw:n ¹)	month	đuờn	bươn	-	𪔐	𪔐	月
49	<i>neix</i> (nei ⁴)	this	nì	nấy	你	女	乃	-
50	<i>ngoenz</i> (ŋen ²)	day	ngòn	hoàn	𪔐	𪔐	祖	旻
51	<i>ok</i> (?o:k ⁷)	to emerge	ôóc	oóc	屋	屋	沃	屋
52	<i>ra</i> (ɣa: ¹)	to look for	lả, rả	xa	羅	𪔐	車	架
53	<i>raemx</i> (ɣem ⁴)	water	lầm	nặ̣m	淦	淦	淦	淦
54	<i>raen</i> (ɣen ¹)	to see	hặ́n	hặ́n	忻	吞	𪔐	𪔐
55	<i>ranz</i> (ɣa:n ²)	house	làn	rườn	蘭	𪔐	𪔐	𪔐
56	<i>roengz</i> (ɣen ²)	to descend	lòng	lồng	隆	𪔐	𪔐	𪔐
57	<i>rox</i> (ɣo: ⁴)	to know	lò	rụ, chặ́c	魯	鲁	𪔐	鲁
58	<i>vaiz</i> (va:i ²)	water buffalo	[vài]	hoài	懷	𪔐	𪔐	怀 𪔐
59	<i>vunz</i> (vɛn ²)	person	hùn	cần	𪔐	𪔐	𪔐	𪔐
60	<i>youq</i> (?jou ³)	to be at	dú	giú	𪔐	𪔐	𪔐	𪔐

