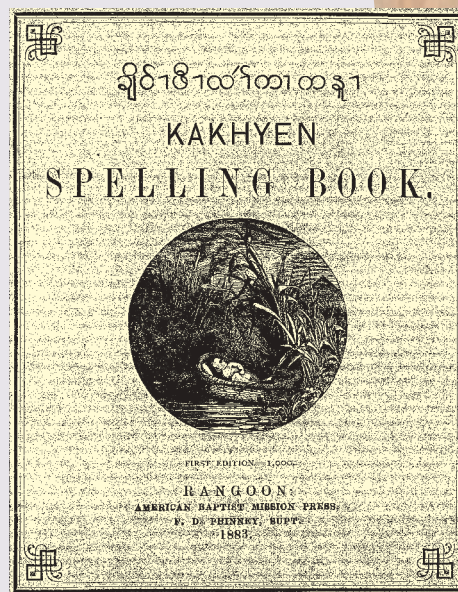


Orthography and vernacular media

Jinghpaw, the majority language among the Kachin people of northern Myanmar, has come to enjoy vibrant vernacular media. If you visit Myitkyina, the largest city in Kachin State today, you cannot help but see colorful posters advertising the latest Jinghpaw-language music. On the internet there are countless Jinghpaw-language websites, from frivolous to serious. This situation is remarkable because the language did not even have a writing system 125 years ago. Today the Jinghpaw media may be the most vigorous among the many minority language media of upland Southeast Asia. We explore how the Jinghpaw orthography became established and how vernacular media have grown.

Keita Kurabe and Masao Imamura



The linguistic landscape of the Kachin region

The term 'Kachin' refers to a complex of upland people living largely in Kachin State and the northern part of Shan State in Myanmar, but also in neighboring areas of northeastern India and Yunnan, in southwestern China. Kachins speak many languages, including Jinghpaw (also called 'Singpho' in India and 'jingpo' in China), Zaiwa, Lhaovo, Lacid, Rawang, and Ngochang (whether or not Lisu or 'Lishaw' is a Kachin language is a question that Müller takes up in his piece in this Focus). While these languages are all of the Tibeto-Burman group of the Sino-Tibetan language family, they belong to distinct branches and are mutually unintelligible. Furthermore, even within one language, for example Rawang, the dialectal differences may be so great that speakers cannot communicate with each other. While many, speaking in Burmese or English, use the term 'Kachin' to refer to what is actually the Jinghpaw language, we use 'Jinghpaw' to distinguish it from the other Kachin languages.

In this world of multiple languages, Jinghpaw has functioned as a lingua franca. According to David Bradley, the Jinghpaw population is by far the largest, estimated at 650,000.¹ The Zaiwa, Lhaovo, and Rawang populations are estimated to be 170,000, 100,000, and 110,000 respectively. The Lacid and Ngochang are considerably smaller.

Multilingualism is common; we can easily find people who can speak, for example, Jinghpaw and Lhaovo. This multilingualism, however, is not reciprocal, because not all the Kachin languages are considered equal in status. Jinghpaw is clearly dominant and of higher status. The vast majority of people who speak only one Kachin language are Jinghpaw-speakers. Those who speak Jinghpaw do not seem to be interested in learning another minority language, similar to how few native Burmese speakers are motivated to learn a minority language.

The development of the Jinghpaw orthography

Given its predominance, it is not surprising that Jinghpaw was the first Kachin language to acquire an orthography. The set of conventions used today for writing Jinghpaw was devised by Protestant missionaries at the end of the nineteenth century. Indeed the history of Jinghpaw orthography and vernacular media is inseparable from global literacy campaigns of Protestant evangelism, whose most visible driver today is the Summer Institute of Linguistics International.

Starting with Adoniram and Ann Judson, who arrived in Burma in 1813 and translated the entire Bible into Burmese by 1834, a succession of American Baptist missionaries came to Burma to translate Christian scripture into the local languages. Among the Buddhists, the missionaries were not successful. They did notice, however, that 'tribal peoples' who lacked writing, such as the Karen, reacted much more favorably to them. The missionaries therefore shifted their focus to upland tribal groups. Because these languages were wholly oral and not written, the evangelists had to come up with an ortho-

graphy for each language before translating the scripture.

A myriad of local languages created much confusion among the missionaries who encountered them. Missionaries 'discovered' the Jinghpaw language in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, but it took quite some while before Jinghpaw was identified as a separate language. At first, missionaries in Burma were working on Jinghpaw without realizing that fellow missionaries in northeastern India were working on the same language.

Efforts to reduce Jinghpaw to writing in northeastern India were initially vigorous; the Baptists used the Roman alphabet to transcribe Jinghpaw and produced a phrase book and vocabulary list in the early 1830s. Their efforts, however, did not last long; perhaps because they realized that the number of Jinghpaw speakers in the region was rather small.

Paul Ambrose Bigandet, the French bishop of Rangoon known for his pioneering study of Buddhism (*The Life, or Legend, of Gaudama, the Buddha of the Burmese*), made visits to Bhamo in northern Burma in 1856 and 1865, marking the beginning of Roman Catholicism among the Kachins. During his first visit, Bigandet made a short vocabulary list of Jinghpaw, which was published in 1858 as a comparative lexicon of Shan, Jinghpaw, and Palaung. This work of Jinghpaw, written in the Roman alphabet, is one of the earliest references to the Jinghpaw spoken in Burma.

It was the Baptist missionaries in Burma who made gains in studying Jinghpaw systematically and in devising an orthography for the language. In 1873, Francis Mason, who had played a major role in translating the Bible into Sgaw Karen (1843) and Pwo Karen (1852), arrived in Bhamo in northern Burma and spent two months studying Jinghpaw. Josiah Cushing, who had translated the Bible into Shan, paid his first visit to Bhamo in 1876. Much neglected in previous research have been the group of young Karen missionaries, such as Bogalay, who accompanied Cushing and stayed in the region to study Jinghpaw.

Cushing and his team put the Gauri dialect of Jinghpaw into writing. They borrowed various elements from the Karen, Burmese, and Shan orthographies, all of which were Indic in origin. In 1877, Cushing then translated into Jinghpaw a portion of the Baptist catechism, which Ann Judson had written in Burmese. He also collected 1500 Jinghpaw words and published a grammatical note in 1880. In 1879, another missionary named William Henry Roberts arrived in Bhamo; he stayed for thirty-four years among the Kachins. Roberts used Cushing's orthography to publish a small spelling book in 1883, and translated the Gospel of Matthew into Jinghpaw in 1885. The use of Cushing's orthography, however, did not gain traction, for reasons unclear to us (see fig.1).

The Baptist missionaries, it appears, decided to do away with the Cushing orthography and create a new one. Ola Hanson, a Swedish-American missionary, who had a good command of Swedish, English, German, Hebrew, Greek

Fig.1 (left): *Kakhyen Spelling Book* (1883). This orthography devised by Cushing would be later superseded by Hanson's orthography, still in use today.

Fig.2 (right): *Jinghpaw Prat*, a short-lived secular Jinghpaw-language newspaper (1958-63).

and Latin, arrived in Bhamo in 1890. Soon he created an original orthography for Jinghpaw using the Roman alphabet instead of the Indic scripts. Hanson chose the Roman alphabet perhaps because he found it easier to capture Jinghpaw sounds. While translating the New Testament (completed in 1911), he and his local assistants, such as Damau Naw, enthusiastically promoted the use of the new orthography by publishing a spelling book (1892), a grammar book (1896), a dictionary (1906), and a reader (1908). Danau Naw, an assistant helping Hanson in literary work since 1893, became one of the earliest Jinghpaw writers, publishing a small booklet in Jinghpaw in 1906.

Jinghpaw vernacular media

In the 1910s, a variety of reading materials in Jinghpaw began to appear. In 1914, the Baptist church published the first periodical in the language, a bi-monthly (later a monthly) newsletter called the *Jinghpaw Shi Laika* [*Jinghpaw News*]. The British colonial government also found the Jinghpaw orthography to be useful, and so commissioned the church to produce school textbooks in Jinghpaw. In 1915, a Textbook Committee was organized under the Deputy Commissioner in Bhamo. Much of this work was actually carried out by J. Frank Ingram, a Baptist missionary and his assistant La Nau, who were also stationed in the same city. They published five series of readers in Jinghpaw for children and the first four grades. Textbooks for various subjects including geography (1918), arithmetic (1918), and basic science (1920) were also produced by the Baptist missionaries. A handbook on hygiene and public health (1931) was made available at the request of the government. In this period, the Baptist church, run by American missionaries and the British colonial government worked together to 'civilize' the natives; literacy campaigns were central to their civilizing project.

The Second World War interrupted publication activities; *Jinghpaw Shi Laika*, for example, discontinued in 1941. This did not, however, mean that there were no publications during the wartime. In fact, Jinghpaw language materials were printed in India. The British and Foreign Bible Society in Calcutta, for example, printed the Jinghpaw Bible.

Jinghpaw media recovered after the war and grew rapidly after Burma's independence in 1948. The most noteworthy event in the post-war period was the growth of secular media. By the late 1950s, Jinghpaw media had grown to publish independently of the church. In 1958 a secular newspaper, the *Jinghpaw Prat* [*The Jinghpaw Times*] was founded in Rangoon. This full-fledged weekly, full of catchy photos, covered a wide range of topics, from a beauty contest in Myitkyina to the latest world news like the Cuban missile crisis (see fig. 2). Although the *Jinghpaw Prat* was discontinued in 1963, this publication, which enjoyed broad readership, represented the Jinghpaw public sphere of the era more than any other.

The case of Jinghpaw-Kachin



Fig.3 (above): A store in Myitkyina selling Jinghpaw-language music.

Fig.4 (below): Jinghpaw-language bookstore in Myitkyina.

The Jinghpaw secular media, however, did not survive the draconian measures towards the minority-language press imposed by Ne Win, who seized power in a coup in 1962. Although the public media were suppressed, Jinghpaw literacy classes were by then so well established that they were able to maintain their work through their ever-expanding church network.

The churches had grown significantly in the 1950s in terms of their printing capacity. In 1957, the Kachin Baptist Convention established Hanson Memorial Press, equipping themselves with their own printing facilities. They purchased a used press in the US and had it shipped to Rangoon. A Bible school student with photography and printing skills, Lazing Gawng, was sent to Rangoon for practical training and he became the manager

of the new press in Myitkyina. This enabled the resumption of the *Jinghpaw Shi Laika*, the same as the pre-war periodical. In the 1960s, the press was led by Saboi Jum, one of the most prominent Jinghpaw intellectuals of the post-war era, who later exerted considerable influence on Kachin politics as the Secretary General of the Kachin Baptist Convention.

The production capacity of Jinghpaw literature increased, and so did the readership. A good indication of readership growth was the opening of the bookstore 'Laika Nau Ra' in Myitkyina. This downtown store originally sold traditional medicine only, but it began to carry Jinghpaw-language publications in 1965 and it grew as a bookstore. Today the store offers the largest selection of Jinghpaw-language books, selling more than one hundred titles in Jinghpaw (see fig. 4).

Throughout the era of Kachin insurgency against the central government – since the founding of the Kachin Independence Army in 1961 to the ceasefire agreement in 1994 (brokered by Saboi Jum) – churches were practically the sole patron of Jinghpaw literature. The most prominent among these was the Kachin Baptist Convention, which continued its literacy campaigns through its childcare program, Sunday School, and 'summer school' (that is, during the annual school break) courses. The churches also produced newsletters, which they circulated by cleverly printing 'limited circulation' on the cover, thus allowing them to bypass the official censorship board of the central government.

Another way that Jinghpaw media bypassed the government interference was having a production site outside the country. In 1982, the Catholic Church began broadcasting in Jinghpaw from the Philippines through their Radio Veritas Asia program.

Jinghpaw and media technology

As the case of the Radio Veritas program indicates, Jinghpaw media have been quick to adapt to new technologies. During the 1980s, young people in Myitkyina started making Jinghpaw-language movies with smuggled cameras. The showing and circulating of these movies was difficult because all the equipment, including a television and a VCR player, had to be carried around. Precisely because it was so difficult, when a showing did take place, people treated it as a festival.

In the 1990s, VCDs began to come into the country from China. VCDs became extremely popular because VCD players were affordable; the disks themselves were easily copied and transported, and survived high humidity. In much of the Kachin region, VCDs allowed ordinary people to see movies for the first time. In addition to pirated Hollywood blockbusters, Jinghpaw producers created original Jinghpaw videos, some of which proved very popular (see fig. 3).

In the early 2000s, the Chinese mobile phone network covered areas of Burma across from the Chinese border. As a result, affordable mobile phone services were available in the periphery of the country far earlier than the central

regions. Chinese CDMA networks reached the Kachin areas near the Chinese border, including Myitkyina, by the early 2000s, a full decade before networks were made widely available in Yangon. Mobile phones were also useful for sending messages. Jinghpaw speakers had the advantage of being able to send text messages in their language using even a very basic mobile phone because, unlike the Burmese or Shan, Jinghpaw orthography does not require any special fonts.

Internet shops also started to open about the same time. Young people in particular spent hours there to chat through social networks. A Kachin web-developer even created a service called *Wunpawng Zupra* [Union Meeting Place], which proved popular until it was eventually overwhelmed by Facebook.

In the development of the Jinghpaw digital media the diaspora communities played a major role. While pastors and pop singers drove the media development inside the country, journalists and activists in exile provided news and advocacy. In 2003, a group of young journalists launched *Kachin News* (kachinnews.com) in Chiang Mai, Thailand. These websites presented breaking news, hard-hitting advocacy, and insightful analysis to the Jinghpaw readership that was hungry for information and analysis on political issues. The number of news sites has increased since the resumption of the war between the Kachin Independence Army and the Myanmar military in 2011.

The Jinghpaw vernacular media continues to thrive today despite the ongoing conflict. Looking back at its history, it would be difficult to exaggerate the role played by Protestant evangelism. The series of *Jinghpaw Readers* are still in use today in modified versions. Baptist churches continue to run summer schools. At the same time, digital technology has radically decentralized media production, allowing journalists, intellectuals, artists, and musicians to work and distribute their products more readily and widely. On YouTube are countless Jinghpaw-language videos ranging from reports on the controversial Myitsone dam to the stand-up comedy of a Baptist pastor.

Keita Kurabe, Research Fellow, Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, based at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (kurabek0926@gmail.com); Masao Imamura, Associate Professor at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Yamagata University (imamura@human.kj.yamagata-u.ac.jp)

References

- Bradley, D. 1996. "Kachin", in S.A. Wurm, P. Mühlhäusler & D.T. Tryon (eds.) 1996. *Atlas of Languages of Intercultural Communication in the Pacific, Asia, and the Americas*, vol. 2.1:749–51. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

