

## LANGUAGE ATTITUDES OF THE T'RUNG

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**Abstract:** This paper describes a research project on the language attitudes of the T'run (Dulong) people of southwest China, speakers of a Tibeto-Burman language fast becoming endangered. A total of 48 T'run residents of two villages were interviewed for their opinions on the use and importance of T'run, Lisu, and Chinese in one of China's most multilingual regions. The results show unanimity about the importance of Chinese in all aspects of life, although few T'run speak the language well and it is a relative newcomer to the region. Attitudes towards T'run are complex, with some in the community viewing it as a language of solidarity even as it retreats from spheres of everyday use, while others bemoan its irrelevance in the changed circumstances of modern life. Women and those over 50 years old feel particular ambivalence about T'run, instead valorizing Lisu, a regional lingua franca. T'run youth feel pride in the language as a marker of ethnic identity but appear to be uncertain about the language's future and in what spheres they should promote its use.

**Keywords:** Tibeto-Burman, T'run, Drung, Dulong, Yunnan, language attitudes, Nu, Lisu, endangered languages

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In a volume of essays on language endangerment and language maintenance, David Bradley (2002: 1) writes, "Perhaps the crucial factor in language maintenance is the attitudes of the speech community concerning their language". Although work on small and endangered languages often references community attitudes, detailed studies by linguists (Tibeto-Burmanists being no exception) are relatively rare, especially when compared to the volume of work on speaker attitudes for larger languages. Much of the work on language attitudes has focused on non-standard varieties of major languages such as English or Mandarin Chinese, or else the ethnolinguistic vitality of immigrant languages.<sup>1</sup>

This is all the more unfortunate because language attitude studies are particularly crucial for the documentation and maintenance of endangered languages, where attitudes may prove decisive to a language's survival, in the absence of pragmatic and political supports. This study of the language attitudes of the T'run (or, as they are called in Chinese, Dulong) ethnic group of southwest China was undertaken as a prerequisite to and aid for documentation, description, and maintenance work on T'run that is currently on-going. It is also meant as a contribution to the literature on the language attitudes of speakers of

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<sup>1</sup> One exception is Kroskrity 1993. The work of anthropologists often contains some of the most powerful insights into the language attitudes of small speech communities.

endangered languages—which can bring insights from sociolinguistic work on attitudes to the emerging field of language documentation, and vice versa.

The research presented and analyzed here was completed over a month-long period in June-July 2007 in two villages with majority T’rung populations, in the two river valleys where most T’rung live. In total, I interviewed 48 members of the T’rung community with standardized questionnaires to gauge their attitudes towards T’rung and the other languages of the area. Of these interviews, 19 were conducted more or less directly in Chinese, while the remainder were conducted with the help of two T’rung translators, one in each village.

This paper presents the results of those interviews, identifying widely-held language attitudes in the T’rung community and examining apparent divergences in those attitudes on the basis of social variables. It is my hope that this description of the T’rung situation will take its place among an increasing number of studies about language attitudes in Tibeto-Burman contexts and in endangered speech communities more generally. If attitudes are the crucial factor in language maintenance, those working on endangered languages must develop a more nuanced understanding of how attitudes form and change, and how they can be measured.

Broadly speaking, the T’rung see their language as closely bound up with their ethnic identity, but they are grappling with a growing awareness of how severely limited its use is beyond their own villages. The region’s recent development and increasing communication with the wider world have opened up differing viewpoints in the community, especially on the basis of age and gender. Current patterns suggest that language shift will take place if outsiders continue entering and altering the community at the current rate, and that even entirely T’rung villages are starting to use a language variety under heavier and heavier Chinese and Lisu influence.

## 2. BACKGROUND

### 2.1. “We’re very small”

With a population of 7,426 (according to the 2000 census; China Data Online), the T’rung are one of the smallest of China’s officially recognized 56 ethnic groups. Although a few now live in large Chinese cities such as Beijing and Kunming, the vast majority of T’rung live in Gongshan Nu and Dulong Autonomous County of Yunnan Province, which encompasses the valleys of the Nu and Dulong rivers and the mountains between them.

Only in the isolated Dulong River valley, which is 95% T’rung, are the T’rung in the majority, although there are significant linguistic and cultural ties to the larger Nu ethnicity in Yunnan and to the Rawang across the border in Myanmar. Subsistence agriculture has been the norm in this economically undeveloped part of China.<sup>2</sup> Only recently have a new road into the valley and increasing

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<sup>2</sup> For more on T’rung history, see Gros 2005 and Li 1999.

government attention brought an incipient division of labor and flow of cash into the local economy.

Although almost all ethnic T'rung speak the language to some degree, there are probably no monolingual T'rung speakers, with the possible exception of a few very elderly people. The T'rung language has been held up as a model of language maintenance in the Chinese context, but this has been largely a matter of its isolated circumstances rather than a concerted community effort (Poa and LaPolla 2007: 339). With such a small population of speakers, the language would be considered *de facto* endangered by some definitions; the recent history of rapid language shift in China, and in Yunnan particularly, enhances this concern. Although the language appears to be stable in the more remote T'rung villages, this study—concerned with areas that have relatively more outside exposure—points to an unease about the language's future among the T'rung themselves. Younger, educated speakers in particular are shifting to Southwest Mandarin, and less so to Lisu.

The influence of Lisu reflects the fact that this is one of China's most multilingual areas, where Southwest Mandarin, Lisu, Nu varieties, Tibetan, and T'rung all come into contact (with Burmese a minor factor directly on the border, and other Yunnan minority languages also spoken in small pockets). Additionally, Southwest Mandarin differs from Putonghua—the prestige language prominent in official contexts, the education system, and in towns of any size—though this study does not cover that distinction. Lisu is an official language of the prefecture, of which ethnic Lisu form a substantial part, and it is the main *lingua franca* of the area north of Liuku up to Bingzhongluo, along the Nu River.

Tibetan, in its Khams variety, becomes important north of Bingzhongluo, which is only a day's walk from the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), the homeland of Tibetan. What is termed the Nu language appears to encompass four distinct speech varieties spoken in communities along the Nu River, all grouped as ethnic Nu by the Chinese government. Linguists have classified these little-known languages as Nusu (Sun & Liu 1986), Rouruo (Sun, Huang, and Zhou 2001), Anong (Sun 1988, 2000), and, most confusingly, the Nu River dialect of T'rung. Locals, following official practice, generally refer to all of these as Nu or Nong. While most of my consultants are probably referring to the Nu River dialect of T'rung when they discuss “Nu”, we have to tread cautiously and allow that Nusu, Rouruo, or Anong may be meant.

Aside from its demonstrated similarities to Anong, and to Rawang across the border in Myanmar, T'rung has not been definitively classified in the Tibeto-Burman group. LaPolla 2000 has suggested affiliation with the Rung branch spoken to the south and east of Tibet, contra the older view, represented in Sun 1982, that tied T'rung to Jinghpo/Kachin. Without further documentation, the question is unlikely to be resolved. The most detailed study of the language, by Chinese linguist Sun Hongkai, was made during a few visits in the 1960s, the findings from which were published in a sketch grammar some 20 years later. Only a handful of other linguists have worked on the language, including

LaPolla—who has also published a sketch grammar, some articles on aspects of T’rung grammar, and a collection of annotated T’rung texts<sup>3</sup>—and Yang Jiangling, a young T’rung linguist now in Beijing. Audio-visual materials and annotated texts are fewer still, with progress hampered by the lack of a written language. Yang Jiangling, with a few collaborators, is working to adapt Robert Morse’s Rawang Romanization system (Morse 1963) for T’rung, continuing an effort begun in the mid-1980’s (see Yue and Long 1986). So far no standard has been accepted and put into use among scholars or in the community.

The case for classifying T’rung’s mutually intelligible dialects is as underdetermined as the case for the language’s genealogical classification. Sun Hongkai describes a basic division between Nu and T’rung river dialects, while LaPolla divides the latter into the mutually intelligible First, Third, and Fourth Township varieties largely on the basis of phonological and lexical differences. All of those interviewed for this study consider themselves speakers of the Third Township dialect, but dialect differences await further elaboration.

## 2.2. *Xiao Chala*

My two research sites—the very different communities of Xiao Chala and Kongdang—were selected with an eye to practicality as much as methodology. Xiao Chala is the one community in the Nu River valley where the majority of the inhabitants would use the label T’rung for themselves, probably because of the village’s 1953-1954 foundation by immigrants from the T’rung River valley. With official ethnic identities under the People’s Republic solidifying around this date,<sup>4</sup> the terms Nu and T’rung seem already to have been applied to the inhabitants of those two river valleys, respectively, ignoring linguistic and cultural similarities in favor of geography. Xiao Chala residents have also accepted these designations, seeing themselves as a unique T’rung outpost amidst Nu and Lisu.<sup>5</sup> Given the village’s relative proximity to the growing town of Bingzhongluo (five or six miles by road, then an hour’s hike), Xiao Chala is the T’rung village easiest to reach for most outsiders, a number of whom are Chinese tourists interested in the bygone T’rung practice of face tattooing for women. Not surprisingly, residents of Xiao Chala speak what is probably the variety of T’rung most affected by contact with Lisu and Chinese, and their language attitudes reflect experiences of contact which other T’rung speakers are likely to face in the future.

According to the village head (*cunzhang*) and the vice village head (*fucunzhang*), Xiao Chala officially has 142 residents who belong to 39 families.

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<sup>3</sup> See LaPolla 2003 for the sketch grammar. A website on the “Dulong/Rawang complex”, a collaboration of LaPolla, Gros, and Dory Poa, can be found at <http://www.tibeto-burman.net/rda> and includes a comprehensive bibliography.

<sup>4</sup> For more about the process of official ethnic classification (*minzu shibie*) in China, see Mackerras 1994, Bradley & Bradley 2002, 77-97, and Poa & LaPolla 2007.

<sup>5</sup> The enthusiastic adoption of ethnic identities handed out by the Chinese state has been well documented. For more on how the official ethnic classification effort still underpins present-day questions of identity among the T’rung, see Gros 2004.

This includes a dozen or so Lisu, who live in their own area a few hours' walk from the T'run houses, as well as a few Nu women (from the Bingzhongluo area—"T'run Nu") married to T'run men. The village itself is widely scattered over a mountain ridge rising over the Nu's western bank, with only a basketball court and church serving as common areas, and no commercial establishments of any kind. People over 50 years of age, especially women, are relatively rare in the village. There are only 61 women to the village's 81 men, according to the village officials.<sup>6</sup> In addition, many young men are absent from the village for extended periods, especially during the warmer seasons, either for part-time construction work or for the gathering of medicinal herbs in nearby mountains (as was the case during my visit).

The sample used here, with its slight skew towards males and towards the middle-aged, reflects demographic realities as much as possible. Similarly, the definition of age groups ("young" as between 15 and 30, "middle-aged" as from 31 to 50, "old" as over 50) was based on discussions in the village about T'run perceptions of age. These groupings, as well as a male/female division, were the primary social variables considered in my sample, although I also recorded and have made use of information about people's religious beliefs, level of education, and degree of mobility. Under a third of Xiao Chala's T'run residents are Protestant Christians; I ensured that at least 6 of the 25 I interviewed in Xiao Chala were professing Christians. By and large, profession was not a useful variable since the majority of villagers are engaged in growing corn, vegetables, and occasionally rice, with some keeping chickens, pigs, and cows. Some families rely heavily on government welfare, while a few are relatively better off due to participation in the cash economy or to family members holding specialized professions such as school-teacher or village head. My translator, 30-year-old Luo Xinhua, is the vice village head and also accountant for the village when necessary. Like the only other Communist Party member in the village, he is an atheist; he is fluent in Chinese due to 5 years of service in the People's Liberation Army. He was present for all of the interviews, bringing me from home to home to speak with one or two members of each household.

### **2.3. Kongdang**

Kongdang, located in the T'run River valley, was a relatively convenient research site because of the unpaved road completed in 1999, which begins in the county capital of Gongshan and terminates at Kongdang after a treacherous route, 7 hours by jeep. Kongdang has thus become the main point of entry for outsiders into the valley, although transportation within the valley itself, where villages are grouped north-south along the river, is minimal. Kongdang, also called Third

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<sup>6</sup> Xiao Chala is by no means unique in this regard. A preponderance of men in China's rural population, now a nation-wide problem, is also likely to be relevant in many cases of language endangerment. Factors that account for the imbalance are China's One Child Policy, a traditional bias in favor of male children, and the greater likelihood that rural women will marry urban men.

Township (*sanxiang*), has grown as a result into the valley's most significant settlement, with over a 1000 residents scattered throughout a dozen dispersed settlements. My 23 Kongdang interviews were conducted in just two of these settlements—Kongdang itself, the most central and town-like of the villages; and Kongmei, a few miles north. Kongdang differs from Xiao Chala significantly in that the former has lodging for outsiders, a basic restaurant, a few shops, and the headquarters of the town government (comprising some 30 civil servants) and a police station. Houses are grouped closer together than in Xiao Chala, and outsiders relying on a cash economy are more in evidence; however, most T'ring in and around Kongdang lead lives similar to those in Xiao Chala. Fewer of those living in Kongdang professed to being Christians, but demographic patterns were otherwise similar to Xiao Chala. My translator was a young non-Christian male of 24, whose father had previously worked in the town government.

### 3. LEARNING HOW TO ASK (IN T'RUNG)

To my knowledge, no sociolinguistic research has been done among the T'ring, although linguistic and anthropological work has yielded some relevant insights. My respondents had never been asked explicit questions about language before; they told me that the conscious, out-loud contemplation of language attitudes was a new experience for them. Anticipating this, I had made simplicity a central feature of my study—the questions asked to all 48 respondents were phrased in everyday terms, often purposely repetitive, and identical explanations were rehearsed for the more challenging questions.

Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. After introducing myself and explaining the scope and purpose of the research, I proceeded with a short list of personal questions concerning age, family size, mobility, and so on. Two separate sets of questions followed: the first, containing 16 questions, asked respondents to reply on an ascending scale from 1 to 5 on the importance of their real or potential children and marriage partner(s) speaking various languages, and on language use in daily life. Most of the second set of questions required “Yes” or “No” responses, but also allowed the options of “Maybe” and “I Don't Know”, although these were seldom chosen. In a few cases, respondents were asked to choose the appropriate language as their answer to a given question. Most respondents answered most questions, though some responded much more readily than others who required extensive explanations.

Although they share similarities with many questionnaires described in the literature, the questions asked were modelled most closely on those suggested by Frank Blair in his field manual (Blair 1990: 112-113). There are other examples of studies which have used a Likert scale from 1 to 5 (5 usually being the highest level of agreement, or strongest possible feeling) to develop more subtle measures than a yes-no questionnaire can provide (e.g. Papavalou and Pavlou 2005). In a few cases, questions were discarded after repeated misunderstandings had demonstrated their unsuitability.

Inspiration for some questions came from subjective ethnolinguistic vitality studies, with their focus on the respondent's subjective impressions of the status of different languages.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, no available model questionnaires fit perfectly for the task of revealing general T'rung perceptions about language—inevitably the questionnaire used here is a hybrid. No attempt was made to gauge subconscious attitudes with a matched guise or similar test: what is presented here is a straightforward combination of observation and the expressed views of T'rung people.

Certain methodological problems should be mentioned briefly. Some respondents chose to speak in Chinese, others in T'rung, and still others in a T'rung variety containing many Chinese, and some Lisu, loan words—translation became a difficult variable to account for. Using the sliding 1-to-5 scale for some of the questions was another challenge. Although some T'rung share the Chinese fascination and engagement with numbers—many Xiao Chala families play the China Welfare Lottery, for example—the scale may have distracted people from the task of discovering and expressing their own language attitudes. Finally, some T'rung welcomed me warmly into their homes, gave me food and drink, and wanted to strike up discussions, but would react with laughter or bewilderment upon being asked for their opinions on such abstract questions. Group settings were the norm, often thwarting any attempt to conduct rigidly one-on-one interviews and producing instead more composite answers.

Although 48 respondents constitute a meaningful percentage of the T'rung population, the absolute number remains small. Partly for that reason, this study is not a fully quantitative one, and no F-ratio or chi square tests have been used to analyze variance and determine significance. Where the quantitative evidence is relevant, the statistics cited are typically averages calculated for a group's responses, whose significance should be relatively uncontroversial.

#### **4. FINDINGS**

The interviews presented here were focused on three languages—T'rung, Lisu, and Chinese—with which nearly every T'rung person has some familiarity from everyday life. Before examining in detail a few of the particular sociolinguistic questions raised by the data, this section describes T'rung attitudes towards these three languages, as revealed by questions about marriage, child-rearing, notions of a language's overall importance, education, community events, and daily life. Other languages are important in the region, most notably Nu and (Khams) Tibetan, so some of my questions were also directed towards these two. Some Burmese is spoken or at least understood in the T'rung township of Maku (Fourth Township), directly on the border with Myanmar, but that language remains a relatively minor factor in Xiao Chala and Kongdang.

Approximately 13% of respondents expressed their interest in learning to speak Nu fluently (again, probably the Nu River dialect of T'rung), citing its

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<sup>7</sup> As pioneered by Giles, Bourhis, and Rosenthal 1981, with a demonstration of how it can be usefully applied in Bourhis and Sachdev 1984.

similarities to T’rung and how those similarities make Nu easier to learn and better-sounding. A small number of people also mentioned Nu as a candidate for lingua franca in at least some parts of the region where Nu and T’rung people form a critical mass of the population. Many also commented on what they see as the Nu influence on the upriver (or northern) dialects of T’rung, as opposed to the Burmese influence on the down-river dialect spoken nearest the Myanmar border. These distinctions were usually meant to highlight the relatively pure T’rung character of the Third Township dialect which most of my respondents spoke. They nearly all considered this dialect to be the most authentic of T’rung varieties, including most of those who had been born or lived elsewhere.

A majority of my respondents rated Tibetan as being not very important (an average score of 2.22 out of 5), saying that it was only useful when interacting with Tibetans, usually for purposes of work. Nonetheless, a number of T’rung people did claim some knowledge (at least comprehension) of Tibetan, with men and Kongdang people stressing its importance slightly more. Bingzhongluo, the town closest to Xiao Chala, is nearly half-Tibetan, but the Nu River dialect of T’rung and Lisu function as *lingue franche* in the town. To some extent, Tibetan is seen among the T’rung as just another minority language, perhaps useful in certain circumstances, but never critical.

#### ***4.1 Chinese: Language of Thought and Communication***

The importance of Chinese is overwhelmingly acknowledged among the T’rung. Given how small a role that language plays in the daily life of T’rung villages, this is a strong testament to the increasingly outward orientation of T’rung people and to their view that Chinese represents modernity, the nation, and economic success. My respondents consistently said that Chinese was of absolute importance for all T’rung people (4.81 out of 5), for their own actual or potential children (4.8), and for their own actual or potential spouses (4.71). Acknowledgment of the importance of Chinese transcended age, gender, and other factors, although young people already proficient in Chinese appeared to be especially vocal in their enthusiasm for the language. Avoiding the stigma of being perceived as a “backward” minority group is another motivation for many T’rung to learn Chinese fluently.

Two other questions add some nuance to T’rung attitudes about Chinese. Asked what language(s) should serve as an inter-ethnic lingua franca in the Nu and T’rung river valleys, just under 42% of my respondents felt that both Chinese and Lisu were appropriate, with just under 40% saying Chinese only and just under 15% saying Lisu only. Older respondents did not favor Chinese as a lingua franca. The choice of Chinese only is remarkable if one considers how few native Chinese speakers live in the region and how recent the language’s prominence there is. In another question, respondents were asked what language besides T’rung they would like to sound like native speakers of: nearly 65% chose Chinese, with the remainder split about equally between Lisu and Nu. My respondents in Xiao Chala and Kongdang found no consensus on the question of



what language to use in ethnic T’rung primary schools, and many considered the use of T’rung on ceremonial occasions to be very important.

	<i>Own children’s fluency</i>	<i>Own spouse’s fluency</i>	<i>Fluency among all T’rung</i>
Xiao Chala	4.74	4.67	4.8
Kongdang	4.87	4.74	4.83

*Table 4.1.1. Attitudes by village on the importance of fluency in Chinese (1-5 scale)*

Chinese only	40%
Lisu only	14%
Both Chinese and Lisu	42%
Nu	4%

*Table 4.1.2. Choice of language for a prefectural lingua franca*

At first glance, one may be surprised at the essentially positive attitudes the T’rung have towards Chinese, given that Chinese may be the language most likely to replace T’rung in various contexts. One explanation lies in the pragmatic attitude towards language evinced by many T’rung. For instance, many people commented on how Chinese is the crucial language for the part-time work that young men now undertake outside T’rung territory, where there is very little paid work. Since any higher education and even much primary education depends on knowledge of Chinese, the T’rung are well aware that Chinese is the language which gives them access to opportunities in other parts of China, although only a handful of T’rung leave the county, not to mention the province.

If pragmatism were the only explanation, however, one might find more evidence that the T’rung are grudging in their acceptance of Chinese’s increasing dominance in their own lives. On the contrary, T’rung attitudes towards Chinese influence in general are relatively positive. Not only has there been no long-term history of Chinese oppression, but active and effective Chinese influence is also relatively recent, dating from the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949. In oral memory, it is the local oppression of Tibetan overlords to the north and Lisu raiders to the south that looms largest; only the advent of direct Chinese rule finally ended these tributary relationships for the T’rung (Gros 2005, ch. 3).

Although the Cultural Revolution bred resistance and resentment among the T’rung, more recent Chinese development policy has brought more benefits than drawbacks, according to some of my respondents. Lisu and Tibetan views of the Chinese language, by contrast, appear to be more negative—these larger ethnic groups have come into more direct conflict with the policies of Beijing, whereas the T’rung had other local yokes, but little of their own autonomy, to lose under the People’s Republic.

## 4.2 *The Ebbing Usefulness of Lisu*

In Kongdang, T’rung ratings of Lisu’s importance lag considerably behind views of Chinese. In Xiao Chala, with its much greater exposure to the use of Lisu along the Nu River valley,<sup>8</sup> Lisu is seen to be distinctly more important than T’rung, almost in a class with Chinese. On average, Xiao Chala residents gave a rating of 4.22 (out of 5) for the importance of one’s own children knowing Lisu, 4.35 for the importance of one’s spouse knowing Lisu, and 4.48 for the overall importance of T’rung people knowing Lisu. These numbers contrast sharply with those in Kongdang, where Lisu trailed T’rung in most respects, with ratings of 3.48, 3.3, and 3.57—see the table below. Moreover, respondents in Kongdang routinely voiced their feeling that the value of Lisu is limited, and that it is being superseded as more people learn Chinese.

Attitudes towards Lisu vary greatly by age and gender, with women and older people stressing its importance more than men and the young. On average, women rated the importance of having their children learn Lisu well at 4.23, while men rated it at 3.56. The importance of T’rung people as a group speaking Lisu well was rated as 4.27 by women, 3.85 by men. The perceived role of Lisu for people in Xiao Chala is clearly much greater—probably because more of them use the language on visits to Bingzhongluo, Gongshan, and other villages in the valley.

Following a similar pattern, young people on the whole rated the importance of having one’s children speak Lisu at 3.35, whereas the middle-aged and the old rated this at 4.03 and 4.17, respectively. The importance of having a Lisu-speaking spouse was rated at 3.59 by the young and 4.14 by the old. Unlike Chinese, the mention of Lisu in some cases elicited very negative responses, with a number of people especially in Kongdang saying that the language was not very important at all for their spouses or children to speak. Many people commented that having some comprehension of Lisu was usually sufficient, but that having active knowledge of the language did not particularly matter to them.

	<i>Own children’s fluency</i>	<i>Own spouse’s fluency</i>	<i>Fluency among all T’rung</i>
Xiao Chala	4.22	4.35	4.48
Kongdang	3.48	3.3	3.57

*Table 4.2.1. Attitudes by village on the importance of fluency in Lisu*

<sup>8</sup> In fact, a team working under David Bradley is embarked upon a three-year study of language shift by other minority groups to Lisu in the Nu River valley. David Bradley, personal communication, February 2007.

	<i>Own children’s fluency</i>	<i>Own spouse’s fluency</i>	<i>Fluency among all T’rung</i>
Women	4.23	3.93	4.27
Men	3.56	3.77	3.85

*Table 4.2.2. Attitudes by gender on the importance of fluency in Lisu*

	<i>Own children’s fluency</i>	<i>Own spouse’s fluency</i>
Young ( $\geq 30$ )	3.35	3.59
Middle (31-50)	4.03	3.74
Old ( $< 50$ )	4.17	4.17

*Table 4.2.3. Attitudes by age group on the importance of fluency in Lisu*

The dominant note in both Xiao Chala and Kongdang was an acceptance of Lisu’s current spheres of use, with little sense that these should or might be expanded. For instance, only one respondent mentioned Lisu in the context of primary school—all others were divided between T’rung and Chinese. Under 15% of respondents thought Lisu alone should be a lingua franca for the whole region, but nearly 42% thought that its use in conjunction with Chinese was the best option. In the recent past, Chinese would have been an unrealistic option for lingua franca, but the fact that is beginning to supplant even Lisu seems to be acceptable, or even welcome, to the T’rung. Again, relatively few of the T’rung I spoke to (around 12%) were interested in attaining native-like fluency in Lisu.

These mixed feelings about Lisu do not lie far beneath the surface in T’rung communities. On the one hand, as one woman in Kongdang put it, “We should speak Lisu, since we live in the Lisu Autonomous Prefecture.” The language enjoys a vague air of official support, sporadically reinforced in school classrooms, on signs; by Lisu-speaking workers and traders; by the production of Lisu-language texts which have only limited distribution among the T’rung. On the other hand, relations with the Lisu have been tense at times—for example, a few of Xiao Chala’s women had been abducted and sold into marriage by a group of Lisu men only a few years earlier. Bride-stealing by the Lisu has been a periodic theme in T’rung history, but should not obscure some of the positive ties forged through religion and work in both the past and present.

### ***4.3 T’rung: “Because It’s Our Language”***

The interviews conducted in both Xiao Chala and Kongdang show that T’rung and Lisu are regarded as nearly equally important, but for very different reasons by different people. As we have seen, the importance of Lisu is in evidence most clearly in Xiao Chala, and among women and older people—the explanation for

this is essentially pragmatic, since the Lisu are numerically and often economically dominant in the region. On the other hand, T’rung is valued, unsurprisingly, as an indissoluble marker of ethnic identity well-adapted to the affairs of the T’rung themselves. In Kongdang, where the value placed on T’rung clearly outstrips that placed on Lisu, there is an added element of practicality, since it is still the most common language one hears away from the few shops and official buildings in the town.

	<i>Own children’s fluency</i>	<i>Own spouse’s fluency</i>	<i>“In order to be truly T’rung”</i>
Xiao Chala	3.64	3.69	4.53
Kongdang	3.78	3.86	4.38

*Table 4.3. Attitudes by village on the importance of fluency in T’rung*

On certain questions there appears to be an implicit community consensus. As is common in endangered language communities, there is an unease about the language abilities of younger speakers: most of those interviewed felt that they speak at least somewhat less fluently and authentically than their elders.<sup>9</sup> The community also recognizes that being monolingual is virtually a non-option, with many responding that it is impossible or just barely possible to survive as a T’rung monolingual. A few respondents in Kongdang pointedly made the distinction between the minimal agricultural self-sufficiency possible for a monolingual and the need to earn cash, which requires speaking other languages.

People also agreed that a true T’rung person must speak the language, but there seems to be flexibility about how much of the language he or she must speak. On a related point, almost 80% of those interviewed stated that they would not believe a stranger they met in a town to be T’rung unless he or she could speak the language well—in a region where many groups look and dress in similar ways, language is a crucial shorthand for identity. On the other hand, there is little sense of language purism: almost no respondents thought it was a negative thing to mix Lisu and Chinese words and phrases freely into T’rung speech for any reason.

## **5. A MALE BENT TO T’RUNG LINGUISTIC IDENTITY?**

The community’s unanimous respect for Chinese and divided feelings towards Lisu and T’rung have emerged so far. Where a consensus is lacking on certain questions, men seem on average to have more positive attitudes towards T’rung than women, who are more likely to acknowledge the importance of Lisu. This section looks in more depth at the evidence for this observation and possible explanations for it.

<sup>9</sup> In this context, respondents mentioned that they are particularly concerned about losing knowledge of the names of plants, animals, places, and traditional practices.

The first result to consider is that men on average responded with a 4.24 score on the importance of one's wife's speaking T'ung well, as opposed to women's 3.21 score on the importance of a husband doing the same. A number of the men gave the same explanation for this: "I want my wife to teach the children"; no women gave the corresponding response. In a regional context where most women move upon marriage to the village of their husband's family, one can add that some T'ung women have moved to Lisu, Nu, or Han areas where they often do not pass on T'ung to their children. One T'ung woman, interviewed with her Han husband present, told me that to her Chinese is of absolute importance and T'ung not at all, even though she continues to live in a T'ung-speaking area. Her husband, who smirked at many of the questions being asked, speaks almost no T'ung himself—and she clearly felt that, to be consistent with her real-life choice of husband, she had to respond that T'ung was entirely unimportant.

Another middle-aged woman gave the following response to this same question about spouses: His speaking T'ung would be very important if he's T'ung, but unimportant if not. To her, and probably to other respondents, the question of a husband's language abilities is closely tied to the question of intermarriage, since it is still a standard assumption in the region that one will speak the language of one's official ethnicity. Among those I interviewed, women are typically expected to learn the language of their husband, including a Lisu woman who had learned T'ung after marrying a T'ung man.

In contrast to the Han-T'ung couple just mentioned, however, I interviewed a Miao man who had taken on a T'ung identity (and learned the language well) after marrying a T'ung woman. He himself said that he was an exception, as a schoolteacher who had moved to the area many decades earlier (far from his home in eastern Yunnan); other T'ung who know Chinese often still speak Chinese to communicate with him. At the time of this man's moving to the T'ung River valley, outsiders were so few that becoming conversant in T'ung was a necessity—but he said this no longer holds true in Kongdang at least.

If a husband's language holds greater sway than a wife's, the latter is still held responsible for language transmission to children. One older woman told me, echoing a common sentiment, that T'ung is important in the home, but not much outside that. Historically, T'ung areas would have used T'ung in just about every sphere of life—according to the oldest woman I interviewed (over 80 years old), many T'ung were monolingual, or bilingual in only T'ung and Nu, as recently as the Nationalist period of the 1930s. The importance of Lisu in Kongdang, according to her, began in that era, and Chinese has only become a significant factor in the last decade or two. T'ung do not expect their language to be used in contexts introduced from the outside (television, shops, government offices), but the sense that it may not even be appropriate for group gatherings and the transmission of knowledge is something more recent.

On average, men ranked their pride in being T'ung speakers at 4.75, while women's responses averaged out to a 4.08 rating. Men were consistently more vocal about the survival of T'ung, too, with a 4.3 rating on the importance of

T’rung’s persistence in 100 years against a 3.5 rating by women. It is particularly those most conscious of the threat to T’rung who say they are least concerned about its possible disappearance—the inhabitants of Xiao Chala and the elderly in general.

	<i>Pride in speaking T’rung</i>	<i>T’rung persisting in 100 years</i>	<i>Own spouse’s fluency in T’rung</i>	<i>Own children speaking Lisu well</i>
Men	4.75	4.3	4.24	3.56
Women	4.08	3.5	3.21	4.23

*Table 5. Male and female attitudes towards T’rung and Lisu*

Although women often said that their T’rung identity and the survival of the language mattered to them, rarely was any comment added to this. Men seemed more clearly influenced by what might be called “the minzu (‘nationality’) view”, as expressed by one Xiao Chala man: “Every ethnic group has its own language, so we should speak ours.” At the other end of the spectrum was an elderly woman who told me she feels 1% proud that she speaks T’rung and is absolutely indifferent to what she sees as the inevitable disappearance of the language.

There is another respect in which we can gauge the stronger male identification with T’rung identity, and by extension with the T’rung language. Almost all T’rung people have both a T’rung name and a Chinese name (although there is often some inter-relationship between the two names). T’rung names have long been a feature of home and village life, but were never adapted to the bureaucratic, categorizing needs of states—for instance, a T’rung name might be Pung, meaning simply first-born son, with a family name only included if clarification is necessary, since the context is always oral and informal. During interviews, nine men and only one woman responded when asked if they preferred their T’rung name to their Chinese name—the rest said they preferred their Chinese name. Although the question was meant in a general sense, many of those responding probably chose their Chinese name because the interviewer was an outsider, and T’rung names are used among insiders.

If men demonstrate a clear pride in T’rung and assert its importance over Lisu, women value the importance of Lisu more highly—as shown by their average 4.23 rating of the importance of teaching one’s children to speak Lisu well, as compared with men’s 3.56 rating. Inter-marriage and the possible desirability of having a Lisu husband form one explanation, although actual inter-marriage with the Lisu is not such a major factor statistically as to bear on the full explanation.

Among those under 40, men and women tend to be equally well-educated, although young men are more likely to seek out part-time labor rather than continue their education. These young men generally refer to the paramount importance of Chinese in such work environments, except when the work

opportunity is in Myanmar; some also said that they actually feel more T'run upon returning from the outside world. The two best-educated women interviewed—one a recent graduate of a vocational school and the other a nurse who had just moved back from the county capital—suggested that gender and age may only be proximate explanations for variance here. Both ranked T'run and Chinese as very important, but minimized the importance of Lisu on the basis of their own urban experiences.

One can speculate that women and those over 50 stress the importance of Lisu because they have not been as exposed as men to the contexts where Chinese is superseding it. Recalling Milroy's observation that the evidence about sociolinguistic differentiation by sex is confused and conflicting (Milroy 1980: 112), we note that whether men or women are stronger supporters of the native language often depends on context-specific social roles, not cross-cultural universals about gender.

## **6. GENERATIONAL DIVIDES**

Although there is a basic consensus among almost all T'run about the importance of Chinese, there appears to be even stronger unanimity among those 30 and under. Young people feel almost as strongly as their elders about having children and spouses who can speak T'run well, but they are less likely to support uses of the language outside the home. Those 30 and under are also significantly more conversant in Chinese, much more likely to code-switch among themselves, and have been exposed more to Chinese-language contexts in popular culture and education. Of the 17 people 30 years of age and under who participated in this study, 12 were proactive about and comfortable using Chinese during the study. Most of them had spent at least a few years in secondary school, becoming conversant and at least partially literate in Chinese; they also tended to be the most mobile members of the community, visiting a town outside their immediate area at least 3 times each year.

One question in the study focused on the use of T'run for special occasions—such as holiday celebrations, weddings, and church services. Young people think it is somewhat important (3.38) to use T'run for these occasions, while those over 50 years old rate the use of T'run in this sphere as being very important (4.27)—the middle-aged fall in between. The issue of language in primary schools is also divisive along generational lines. Over one third of all those interviewed support the use of T'run as the medium of instruction in T'run-area primary schools, at least as a transition to Chinese-medium schooling. Only 18.75% of young people, however, support T'run in schools, the rest preferring Chinese. This stands in contrast to approximately half of those over 30 years old, who support T'run in primary schools.

Currently, the main primary school in Kongdang uses Chinese and the former T'run-language primary school in Xiao Chala has been closed due to low attendance, but there are a handful of other T'run-language primary schools in

the Dulong River valley.<sup>10</sup> Given that reading and writing in T’rung are not currently taught and that students move rapidly into Chinese, there is little or no T’rung-language education directed towards T’rung maintenance—the stated goal is to move students towards bilingualism, using T’rung mostly as is necessary for communication. Only one person mentioned Lisu in the context of education; most others feel that Lisu could be picked up informally over time, through interactions with Lisu people.

	<i>Support T’rung in primary school</i>	<i>Support Chinese as lingua franca</i>
Young ( $\leq 30$ )	18.75%	64.70%
Middle (31-50)	47.40%	57.90%
Old ( $> 50$ )	50%	33.30%

Table 6.1. Support for T’rung and Chinese in schools and region (percentage)

The relative indifference of young people to Lisu is also expressed in their answers to the question of what language they would most like to achieve native-like fluency in. Only one young person chose Lisu, as opposed to four who chose Nu, two who chose English, and even one who chose Korean because of a fascination with Korean films she had seen on television; not surprisingly, a majority of the young (53%) chose Chinese. Perhaps the lack of interest in Lisu relates to young people feeling that they already speak Lisu well enough, or that it is easier to learn Lisu informally. In any case, this group is clearly also the most sensitive to the inroads Chinese has made against Lisu as a *lingua franca* in the region. Those who feel they have mastered Chinese relatively well, such as my Kongdang translator, tend to feel that they should either learn a language of even wider scope (usually English) or a language for which they feel some particular affinity. Fluency in Lisu, and perhaps even competence, is not usually seen as a practical necessity.

The attitudes of those between 30 and 50 in Xiao Chala and Kongdang are more difficult to characterize. Lisu is clearly valued more by this group: one case in point is their 4.03 rating for the importance of one’s children speaking it, against the 3.35 rating given by the young. On the other questions relating to Lisu, the middle-aged fell in between the young and the old, as mentioned above. At the same time, the middle-aged overwhelmingly (close to 80%) wanted to study Chinese so as to gain native-like proficiency. According to a number of those interviewed, men in their 40s and 50s are often the best Lisu speakers, but their

<sup>10</sup> At the time of this research, Li Jinming, a T’rung anthropologist, was running a Kunming-based workshop to help T’rung primary school teachers teach the language (Li Jinming, personal communication, July 2007). According to Stephane Gros (personal communication, May 2007), a new T’rung-language textbook, based in part on the 1986 effort, has been created and may come into use soon.



Chinese proficiency is unlikely to be as high as young people's, unless they have had certain kinds of educational or work experience.

Few could elaborate on how they had learned Lisu, but it seems likely that the language was often learned during part-time work or trade away from the village, and that the presence of Lisu traders, workers, and pastors in T'run villages has reinforced this during the past few decades. Chinese is sometimes learned through informal contact or temporary work as well, but those who can speak the much-desired *Putonghua* standard all have ties to education, government work, or the outside world.

The church in Xiao Chala, which includes both T'run and Lisu members, may provide an interesting case of language contact in action. Although the pastor himself is Lisu, he conducts services largely in T'run out of deference to the T'run majority, according to congregation members. As Lisu pastors have helped spread Christianity into the Dulong River valley, they may actually be creating a new domain for T'run, as well as a contact situation with Lisu. Christianity is still a novelty for most T'run, finding more success among the young and at most practiced by one-quarter or one-third of the communities I visited, but its further spread could well have an impact on language attitudes that are already in transition. Unless a T'run standard is established and used for religious texts, those wishing to read scriptural writings have an added incentive to learn the Lisu script or Chinese, or even the Rawang orthography whose use in Burma has had much to do with Christianity.

Middle-aged and older men stand out not only in their Lisu proficiency but also in their strongly positive attitudes towards T'run: they are the group most likely to care about raising T'run-speaking children and about marrying other T'run speakers. Young people tend to be outspoken in their pride for T'run, though they are wary about taking action in their own lives to support the language, and endorse the use of Chinese in most public contexts. For instance, young people are most likely to say that T'run's survival in a century's time is important to them (4.35); on the other hand, many of those over 50 face this question with indifference or skepticism, giving a rating of 3.25. Three older people commented independently along the same lines, "By then, everyone will speak Chinese." No one under 50 made this comment—one young man who overheard it responded, "Old people's feelings are very different from mine."

	<i>Own children's Lisu fluency</i>	<i>Using T'run for holidays, ceremonies etc.</i>	<i>Care about T'run persisting in 100 years</i>
Young ( $\leq 30$ )	3.35	3.38	4.35
Middle (31-50)	4.03	3.75	4
Old ( $> 50$ )	4.17	4.27	3.25

Table 6.2. Attitudes towards T'run and Lisu by age

Generational divides in T’rung language attitudes are many-layered, with actual language competency a closely related variable. Proficiency in T’rung is greatest among the elderly, of course, with a small but noticeable drop-off among the young; the ability to speak Lisu, partly correlated with life experience, seems to be strongest among those from about 40 to 70. Chinese proficiency works in the opposite direction from each of these, with those in their teens and twenties speaking best, as a result of education, media, and the arrival of outsiders.<sup>11</sup>

Despite their pride, the young are less likely to profess concrete commitment to a language that has no place in a broader world which increasingly attracts their attention. As one young man commented to me, “I would be proud of T’rung if other people in the world knew about it.” The middle-aged wish they could attain the Chinese proficiency of their children, but are generally comfortable with their T’rung abilities and their commitment to the language. If anything provokes anxiety, it is the case (as one mother explained) of speaking in T’rung to her child, who responds in Chinese. Those over 50, who might be in a position to bolster pride in T’rung, are perhaps the most sceptical about the present and future state of the language, and are most conscious of its retreat. More than any other group, they think that young people speak T’rung much worse than their elders and that the language may not be suited to present-day life and the future of the T’rung people.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The research outlined and analyzed above focuses on the language attitudes of the T’rung, whose language is still vital but beginning to show signs of endangerment. Aside from the absolute importance they ascribe to Chinese, the T’rung have mixed views of the other languages they are familiar with, although there is a basic standard of pride in their native language. Residents of Xiao Chala, impacted by the Nu River valley language shift towards Lisu, value Lisu just below Chinese, seeing T’rung as limited to their village. Yet even in the northern section of the Nu River valley, however, there are signs that the spread of Lisu as a *lingua franca* may be followed by a wave of Chinese. Overall, women and those over 50 also tend to stress Lisu’s importance over T’rung. In Kongdang, however, pride in the T’rung language is stronger, as the language is felt to be of wider practical use. Divisions along age and gender lines are also sharp on issues relating to T’rung’s spheres of use, such as education and public events and ceremonies.

The attitudes studied here, and the possibilities for taking account of them in future work, hopefully will find resonance in other endangered language situations. The picture presented of one gender feeling relatively disengaged from the language, and of generational divides over language use, have larger implications if consistently shown in endangered language situations.

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<sup>11</sup> In an arresting moment, my Kongdang translator said that having the chance to get to work with me justified his long study of Chinese. Chinese is of course the common language between the T’rung and the new trickle of non-Chinese who visit the area, too.

Undertaking a documentation or a maintenance program is challenging and risky without information of this sort. The work of keeping endangered languages vital must begin and end with the attitudes of the speakers themselves.

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## APPENDIX: SURVEY QUESTIONS

### QUESTIONNAIRE #1: Scaled Questions

- Scale: 1 = not at all (完全不重要)  
 2 = a little (有一点重要)  
 3 = moderately (不太重要)  
 4 = quite a lot (很重要)  
 5 = absolutely (绝对重要)

#### 1-6. T'rung, Lisu, and Chinese for children and marriage partners.

1. (If you have children or were to have them), how important is it to you that your children can speak T'rung very well?  
 如果你有孩子，他们会说流利的独龙语，这对你来说有多重要？
2. How important is it to you that your children can speak Lisu very well?

如果你有孩子，他们会说流利的傣傣语，这对你来说有多重要？

3. How important is it to you that your children can speak Chinese very well?

如果你有孩子，他们会说流利的汉语，这对你来说有多重要？

4. If you were marrying someone now, how much would it matter whether your partner speaks T'ung very well or not?

如果你现在要结婚，你的结婚对象能说流利的独龙语，这对你来说有多重要？

5. If you were marrying someone now, how much would it matter whether your partner speaks Lisu well or not?

如果你现在要结婚，你的结婚对象能说流利的傣傣语，这对你来说有多重要？

6. If you were marrying someone now, how much would it matter whether your partner speaks Chinese well or not?

如果你现在要结婚，你的结婚对象能说流利的汉语，这对你来说有多重要？

#### 7-16. General views on language use.

7. Do you think young people today speak T'ung as well as the older generations? Answer 5 if you think they speak much better, 4 a little better, 3 for the same, 2 for not as well, 1 for much worse.

现在年轻人说独龙语的水平跟老一辈的人比较，你觉得怎么样？（答案请选择5-1）

5 年轻人比老一辈人说得流利

4 年轻人比老一辈的人说得好一点

3 年轻人和老一辈的人的水平一样

2 年轻人不如老年人

1 年轻人说得很差

8. Is it possible to earn enough money, to survive, if you *only* know how to speak T'ung?

如果一个人只会说独龙语，能不能赚足够的钱维持生活？

9. How strongly do you believe that T'ung people should *only* use the T'ung language for important events and rituals in places where they live?

在独龙地区的独龙人举行重要庆典或仪式的时候，应该只说独龙语，你认为这有多重要？

10. How important is it for T'ung people to speak Lisu very well?

你认为独龙人能说傣傣语有多重要？

11. How important is it for T'ung people to speak Chinese very well?

你认为独龙人能说汉语有多重要？

12. How important is it for T'ung people to speak Tibetan very well?

你认为独龙人能说藏语有多重要？

13. In order to be a true T'ring person, how important is it to speak to T'ring very well?

你认为要成为真正的独龙人，能说流利的独龙语有多重要？

14. Any thought or idea you can express in Lisu or Chinese, you can express equally well in T'ring. To what extent do you agree?

你能用傈僳语或汉语表达的想法和意见，同样地也能完全用独龙语表达，你同意吗？同意度怎样？

15. As far as you're concerned, how important is it to you that there are still people using the T'ring language in 100 years?

一百年后还有人继续使用独龙语，对你来说有多重要？

16. To what extent do you feel proud that T'ring is your mother tongue?

独龙语作为你的母语，你感到自豪的程度如何？

## QUESTIONNAIRE #2: Other Questions

**Answers:** Yes (是)  
No (否)  
Maybe (可能)  
Not Sure (不知道)

17. Are jokes told in T'ring funnier than jokes in other languages?

用独龙语说的笑话比用其他语言说的笑话听起来比较笑吗？

18. If a stranger comes to you in town and says he is T'ring, but he can only speak the T'ring language a little, will you consider him to be T'ring?

如果你在城里，有个陌生人来告诉你他是独龙人，可是那个人只能说一点点独龙语，你会不会把他当着独龙人吗？

19. If, when young, you moved to a town where most people could not speak T'ring, do you think you would forget how to speak the language well?

如果你年轻的时候搬到一个大多数人都不会说独龙语的地方，你认为你的独龙语就会说得不流利吗？

20. If there were a newspaper in the T'ring language that you could read, with news from the Nu River valley and the T'ring River valley, would you read it?

如果有一份你能看懂的，报道有关怒江和独龙江新闻的独龙语报纸，你会看吗？

21. Do you think that schools in T'ring areas should first teach children in T'ring or some other language?

你认为在独龙区的学校，应该先教小孩子独龙语还是其他语言？

22. Do you ever feel ashamed to speak T'ring in public in a big town like Gongshan?

在贡山那样的大城镇的公众场合中你有没有增经觉得不好意思说独龙语？

23. Do you think it is a bad thing if T'rung people use lots of Lisu and Chinese words when they are speaking T'rung?

独龙人说独龙语的时候，使用很多傣傣语和汉语借词，你认为这样很不好吗？

24. Do you think it is a bad thing if a T'rung person forgets how to say something in T'rung and so uses a Lisu or Chinese word instead?

独龙人说独龙语的时候，有某些词忘了独龙语怎么说，所以就用傣傣语或汉语替代，你认为这样很不好吗？

25. Do you think that everyone living in the Nu River valley and the Dulong River valley should speak Lisu *or* Chinese well so that different ethnic groups can communicate with each other? Chinese; Lisu; Both; Other \_\_\_\_\_

你认为住在怒江和独龙江的人都应该会讲流利的傣傣语或汉语，这样不同民族才能够彼此沟通？汉语；傣傣语；两个语言都会说；其他语言 \_\_\_\_\_

26. If you have the chance to learn another language so well that you would sound like a native speaker, which would it be? Tibetan; Lisu; Chinese; Nu; Other \_\_\_\_\_

如果你有机会学好另一种语言，而且要学得跟说母语的人一样流利，你会学那一种语言？藏语；傣傣语；汉语；怒语；其他语言 \_\_\_\_\_

27. In what place do you think the most authentic version of T'rung is spoken?

你认为，什么地方说的独龙语是最地道的？